

postmortal

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by Anonymous

Summary

It didn't quite click into him, not until he registered the pain in Tubbo's eyes, the way Ranboo set one foot in front of the other and hunched over his friend protectively. Then he saw the blood, matting a head of golden hair, clumping the strands together, and he knew, *he knew, he knew and he hurt and he-*

Wilbur broke, he sobbed, he screamed, "*Tommy,*" and there was blood on his hands, "wake up, *wake up!*"

Tubbo hugged the body ever tighter.

-

Or: Tommy was dead, but Wilbur was alive, and living didn't seem to be all that worth it at all when his little brother was gone.

Loss brings people together, however — Tubbo and Ranboo were adamant that they needed to keep him alive, if only for a chance at healing and redemption. So Wilbur tried his best; he learnt to live, for Tommy, and one day maybe he'd even learn to live for himself.

Meanwhile, he might or might not be haunted by Tommy's ghost.

Notes

ayup ! welcome to projection central, i've written this bitch out completely so expect three updates once every two days at around 8 pm EST, none of my usual batshit inconsistent upload schedule ! :D

i started toying with the premise of this fic way before wilbur's canonical resurrection, so some stuff will be different: namely everything to do with the nature of death, limbo, and resurrection in the dsmp!

some trigger/content warnings: references to wilbur's suicide, suicide ideation on both wilbur and tommy's parts, grief and heavy talks of death, non-graphic descriptions of corpses, dark thoughts specifically those pertaining to self-loathing !

enjoy and take care!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

epilogue

Chapter Summary

"I need to protect him," he whispered. "And I need to protect you." It was a constant, his constant, as kind and faithful as the sea, and he would never love anything as strongly as he did now, looking at his brother and his son.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur never wanted to come back.

After dying for the third time and having a part of him break off to become a ghost, he decidedly didn't care about that anymore; there wasn't a point in lamenting his existence when there were more pressing issues at hand, like *a blue sheep and blue dye and blue, blue, blue*, or on the flip side of himself, *silence and unending darkness and rest, eternal fucking rest*.

Every now and then, though, during his rare moments of calm and quiet, the part of him in limbo would be wracked through with longing, a loss that cut so deep, so cleanly through that he felt it like a hole in his body.

He'd never been one to believe in the supernatural, but a part of him had become an honest-to-Prime ghost, *an actual real fucking ghost*. Sometimes he'd sleep to the sound of darkness and dream of grey fingers and unfinished business, and then he'd wake up and wonder which part of him lost the coin flip that decided who had to move on and who got to stay.

Suffice to say, being resurrected fixed nothing.

He didn't want to be here, was the thing. He was dead and happy to *be* dead, now he's back, and they didn't want him either, he's sure of it.

But the devastation that he woke up to proved otherwise — he opened his eyes to the sunrise, to a crater in the ground, and then to two figures hovering close by. Tubbo, he recognised, and Ranboo, his brain supplied, and Wilbur opened his mouth to speak but his eyes wandered down and locked onto the body that Tubbo clutched to himself.

It didn't quite click into him, not until he registered the pain in Tubbo's eyes, the way Ranboo set one foot in front of the other and hunched over his friend protectively. Then he saw the blood, matting a head of golden hair, clumping the strands together, and he knew, he *knew, he knew and he hurt and he-*

Wilbur was not a monster. Wilbur was not a saint.

Wilbur was not a lot of things — when he was alive, *really alive*, he used to have more to his name: musician, general, traitor — but now that he was back the only thing he thought he should be and yet *wasn't* was *brother*.

He was human, painfully, a reminder of everything he couldn't make himself into, and it started like this: Wilbur fell to his knees.

He held a hand out to Tubbo, the tips of his fingers trembling. Tubbo's face hardened and he wrapped his arms tighter around the body, but he stepped forward, breaking away from Ranboo, and kept stepping forward until he was face-to-face with Wilbur.

He reached out, slowly, ran a shaking hand through locks of golden hair, and it felt like a thread wound around his body, pulling at his bones, unspooling him slowly, inch by aching inch.

A part of him, drenched in blue and surrounded by a black void, was no longer alone.

The rest of him shattered freely, swathed in the kind of emptiness that pressed in from everywhere, all at once, every side of him squeezing infinitely inward, and he was breaking but first and foremost he did not want to be here. So Wilbur broke, he sobbed, he screamed, “*Tommy*,” and there was blood on his hands, “wake up, *wake up*-!”

Tubbo hugged the body ever tighter.

“*Are you seriously implying that I can't raise a child all by myself?*”

“*I'm not implying shit, idiot,*” Tommy retorted. “*You're actually reading too much into it.*”

“*It's not called reading into it if you're literally saying it.*” Wilbur swung open the door to the caravan and stepped outside. Tommy followed him and made sure to close the door softly. “*Okay, semantics, whatever, what the fuck are you trying to tell me, then?*”

“*I'm trying to tell you that you can't raise a child all by yourself,*” Tommy snapped.

The night air pressed into him from all around. Wilbur felt suffocated by the sound of cicadas and rushing water as he strode away from his caravan and towards the river. When there was nowhere else to go, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his frat jacket and whirled around to glare at Tommy.

“*You don't even know where its mother is — and you seriously didn't fuck a salmon, don't try that shit on me,*” Tommy continued, crossing his arms as he scowled. “*And then you brought it here to the Dream SMP. The fucking Dream SMP! Are you insane? You're living out of a- a stupid drug van, Wilbur, and I got arrested yesterday, again, because I tried to cover for you and your kid! What the fuck are you doing with your life?*”

"I don't know!" Wilbur yelled, throwing his hands up in the air. Tommy tensed, eyes darting back to the caravan, and Wilbur lowered his voice immediately. "I don't know Tommy, I don't fucking know what I'm doing, okay?"

He stepped back to look at Tommy better. The heel of his shoe broke the riverbank and hit water.

"Look, I'm sorry I dragged you into this, alright?" he said. "You don't have to- to stick around me and Fundy if you don't want to, Tommy. I'm not asking you to do anything you don't want to, right, you can fuck off for all I care and- "

Wilbur stopped himself. He dragged a hand down his face and sighed in frustration.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Look. I didn't mean that last bit, I'm- I'm sorry." His breaths started coming quicker, wetter, more salty at the back of his throat. His voice was thick. "You can leave if you want to, man, it's okay."

Tommy scoffed, but his eyes softened. "Fuck you," he said. "I'm not going anywhere. You can't make me."

Wilbur shook his head. There was no breaking Tommy away from him — the both of them had been etched into stone the moment Wilbur decided that this kid was his kid. His chest quieted into fondness, and he exhaled his frustrations into the night air.

Tommy didn't deserve his bullshit.

"Let's go back inside," he said, and Tommy followed him back into the caravan.

It was only by a miracle that neither Tubbo nor Ranboo turned him away; there was a sword at his back, made of Netherite and bursting with enchanting magic, but it didn't press into him, and when he followed them out of the remains of his country, they didn't protest at all.

The trip they took to a 'Snowchester' was long, loopy, and they vehemently avoided the Prime Path. Wilbur didn't need to question it — there was a house at the intersection they would've passed, a house and a bench and a little farm tucked into a hillside, a house with its doors forever left half-opened — so he followed them and he ignored the sword behind him.

The sight of Snowchester hammered in just how much he had missed, being dead for thirteen years. It was a snow-clad village separated from the Greater Dream SMP by an arm of the sea, and Wilbur found himself hugging and rubbing his own arms, though he couldn't tell whether the cold was as physical as he would like it to be.

A mansion came into view, towering far above the spruce trees growing out of the sheet-white ground, and there was a wall — because of course there was, it looked like Tubbo had learnt his lesson on walls and self-defence — half-built and missing at places, but a wall

nevertheless. Everything else was made of spruce and bricks, and all the houses faced away from the Greater Dream SMP.

Tubbo stopped at an intersection by the mansion, face grim.

“We need to bury him,” he said.

“Okay,” Wilbur said. His throat hurt as he spoke. “Where?”

Tubbo turned to him, as if only realising that he’s followed. His expression darkened in disdain.

“*We* need to bury him,” he spat, “exclusive. And *you*, you need to- you need to, to fuck off. I don’t know.” He stepped back, clutched the body closer to his chest. Neither of them dared to look at Tommy or Tommy’s face. “We have a couple guest houses around. Go- go, fuck off, leave us alone.”

Wilbur felt sick to the bone. “But that’s-“ he cut himself off. “That’s- Tommy, that’s my brother, you can’t, he’s my brother-“

“And you weren’t there!” Tubbo wrapped a hand around Tommy’s head, clutching his hair, while his own face streamed with tears and snot. “You- you weren’t there, were *never* there for him, you don’t fucking understand, you don’t *get* to say that anymore-!”

“He’s my brother,” Wilbur said weakly, “I need to be with him now-“

“It doesn’t matter, Wilbur!” Tubbo shouted. “None of this, all of it doesn’t fucking matter! Now it doesn’t! He’s *dead*, and you- you weren’t there!”

Tubbo stopped to breathe, face flushed. Wilbur shrank away from him; he couldn’t blame the kid. He couldn’t blame him, he couldn’t move, he couldn’t breathe. He- he couldn’t- anything at all-

“You did this,” Tubbo seethed. “I’ll kill you. I’ll fucking end you.” A sob tore itself out of him. His lips were trembling. He turned away, his back to Wilbur, head down as he spoke again. “Ranboo, please escort Wilbur Soot to a guest house and keep him there. If I see him *out* at any point today, you have my full permission to hunt him down and kill him until he is completely dead. Again.”

The tip of a sword poked at his back and Wilbur suppressed a full-body flinch. He gave Tubbo’s back one last look of longing before he reluctantly headed down the path to Snowchester’s residence area.

Ranboo led him towards a house — empty, perhaps deserted, he thought, judging by the dust that had settled on the outer windowsills, and the unlit interior. Its raised balcony looked out to the sea, and Wilbur would’ve stopped to appreciate the beauty if he wasn’t so- if he- if the situation wasn’t as dire as it was.

“You can stay here,” Ranboo told him, unlocking the front door to reveal the foyer. His mismatched eyes, eerie as they were, held deep fatigue in them, and they were fixed onto the

floor. "This is supposed to be Tommy's house, but..."

Ranboo gestured lamely. There was a house tucked into a hillside, a little ways away from Snowchester. All of them knew this. None of them dared to say it.

"And... and you're just gonna leave me alone?"

"Yes," Ranboo replied after a pause. He hovered by the doorway, one hand on the handle, the other around his sword. "You heard what Tubbo said. I'm going to lock the door from the outside, and if you try to hurt any one of us, we'll kill you."

"I won't," Wilbur muttered, shoving his hands into the pockets of his coat, "hurt anyone, I mean. I'm sorry, Ranboo. I won't hurt anyone, I- I don't even know what's happening, why I'm here, what I'm supposed to do and—" he blinked hard and quick, "and I won't try anything. I'm sorry." He didn't know why he apologised. He wished there was a fireplace in the guest house. "Lock the door. I'll stay here."

Ranboo nodded. He backed away, still refusing to look at Wilbur. He opened his mouth, looked like he wanted to say something — maybe a threat, a question, maybe he would have liked to tell Wilbur to go back to whatever hell where he had come from, but then he shook his head and closed the door.

There was a series of clicks, locks sliding into place, and then footsteps moving away from the house.

Fundy slept soundly through the sounds of Wilbur and Tommy's arguing, tucked comfortably under the covers of his cot. His russet-furred ears stuck out from his auburn hair, and for a second Wilbur was struck with nostalgia, with an age-old pining for the sea, because his little baby boy looked so much like his mother that sometimes it hurt to even look at his face.

Tommy was right — Wilbur didn't know what he was doing, raising a child all on his own. He was far too young to be doing any of this, and he should've gone literally anywhere else in the universe, but the truth was that when he had nobody left, there was really only one person left he could count on to support him.

Wilbur sat down next to the cot and looked at his son, then — his beautiful, beautiful son — and he was suddenly consumed by a fire that spoke of a love so bright and so fierce that he wouldn't know how to put it out if he wanted to.

"I need to protect him," he whispered. "And I need to protect you." It was a constant, his constant, as kind and faithful as the sea, and he would never love anything as strongly as he did now, looking at his brother and his son. "I may not know what I'm doing, Tommy, but I need to be strong enough to protect the two of you."

Tommy sighed and reached out to Fundy to brush a strand of hair out of his face. Wilbur's heart squeezed. "Wil, Wilbur, you already are," he said. "And you're- you-“ he gestured, face pinched, "you've done enough. You're enough, or fuckin' whatever."

Wilbur nodded, but his head was elsewhere. Tommy wasn't a parent — he didn't understand the way Wilbur felt his stomach being upended at the thought of Dream, or Sapnap, or anyone else he didn't fully trust, walking into his caravan and finding his son alone and defenceless, or deciding that sixteen was old enough an age for Tommy to die.

He couldn't bear it. Tommy didn't understand, Tommy would never understand. Tommy was young, was naïve, was bright-eyed and strong and hopeful, and his optimism spilled its way into Wilbur, took root in him and began blooming into visions of grandeur.

He needed to protect them. He was going to protect them, and he was strong enough to do it. He had to be.

The very next day, Wilbur started a nation.

Snowchester was lonely.

There was Tubbo, there was Ranboo, there were the thumping sounds coming from the attic of their house beside Wilbur's, and then there was nothing else but snow.

The void had been lonely, too.

(He'd been alone and he'd been lonely but there was always someone with him, someone with the cosmos painted on her skin and death by her footsteps, and she had tried to cradle him but he'd been hateful and he'd been bitter and he had shied away from even the touch of the universe.)

Sometimes he slept for hours, days, weeks, months, and then he would open his eyes to the dark, yet darker, stars too far away to reach and memories slipping from his fingers like sand. He was fine with the loneliness, for the most part, though he wouldn't deny the fact that he'd missed the people he cared about — but death, peace, silence, it all had been worth it.

Silence. After a while, the silence started to bother him.

(This was what he told himself: he used to be a musician, long ago.

He used to be a musician, before explosions and nations and wars and even children, he was a boy made of music and mahogany, his voice that of a siren's and ears tuned to the melodies of the world.

He used to be a musician, and now he couldn't live without noise in his ears.)

White noise was no substitute for music. He had forever to listen to the sound of his own voice, intermingled with the static of the void, the humming of the universe, but the sounds in his memories were the first to go. A quick two years postmortem and suddenly he woke up realising he had forgotten the sounds of his friends' voices. Two years of bliss, and then eleven years of longing for something he had made peace with the fact that he would never get back.

And as he stood in an empty house, he couldn't help but think that snow was the perfect sound dampener.

So yes, it was the silence that bothered him the most.

Wilbur rummaged through chests and built a furnace from the ground up, shuffled about the house and made himself busy, all if only to drown out the vacancy in his ears, the void that Tommy used to fill with constant chattering and happy little bullshits, back when they could still look each other in the eyes and not flinch away.

He explored the guest house and made a note of everything. The house was relatively small, though much spacier than whatever he had in Pogtopia; there was a foyer, a ladder leading to a small basement, and a staircase to the second floor. Upstairs was a bedroom that looked like it was built to be an attic — a bed that was a little too short for his height, and a window with a good vantage point overlooking the rest of Snowchester from a decent height up.

He looked outside, at the snow hugging the landscape, and his eyes found their way to two figures gathered next to a tower on a little hill, one kneeling over a hole and one not.

He looked away. It was something he wasn't allowed to witness.

In limbo, it had taken him two years to realise that he had forgotten the sound of his friends' voices.

And now, it took him no time at all to think that he would never hear Tommy's ever again.

Wilbur laid down on the bed and closed his eyes. There were no tears at the corner of his eyes, there were no tears running down the sides of his face, and there were no tears at all because he wiped down his face and *his hands were not wet*.

They couldn't be.

The silence returned.

"Let me rehash this, okay, no, don't pull that face on me- "

"You're obnoxious, you're annoying, you're dumb and wrong and I don't like you- "

“-no, hey- fuck off, dude, you literally- you just died, you got shot and you literally just died, which one of us is the dumber one-“

“-memememe my name is Wilbur Soot and I hate people who look different than me-“

“-don’t, don’t fucking say that! Tommy! You- stay the fuck still-“

Tommy yelped as Wilbur tugged at the ends of his bandages. He cursed out Wilbur’s bloodline, but he at least stopped moving. After a while, his cursing subsided into angry silence as he sulked and Wilbur continued wrapping his torso in gauze.

“Was that so hard, Tommy? Was that really so hard?” Wilbur said, pinning the end of the bandage and cutting off the excess. He reached over for a bottle of healing potion and pressed it into Tommy’s hands.

“Yes,” Tommy deadpanned.

He sniffed the potion, face twisting into a grimace, before he tipped the bottle into his mouth and chugged down its contents in three seconds flat.

“Cheers, Wil-bah,” he said, and then he belched, loudly and shamelessly so.

“You’re actually disgusting,” Wilbur said, scrunching his nose.

He stood up to open a window as Tommy shrugged his shirt on. Outside, Fundy and Tubbo bickered over a blueprint for L’manberg’s rebuilding plan, standing a little too close to a still-open crater. Fundy caught his gaze from the corner of his eyes, and he turned to Wilbur to smile and wave, which Wilbur returned.

The war was over, finally. It had taken too much out of the L’manbergians, too much out of Wilbur, but it was over. He couldn’t stand the sight of blackstone and the smell of gunpowder, but they were free, and it did them no good to dwell on the past. He thought about his father, his friends, and oh, Prime, perhaps Niki would love to see L’manberg, perhaps she would love to see him because he would love to see her too, perhaps he could ask Dream further into peacetime to let her in.

Wilbur sighed. He could almost believe that things were going to be alright.

But someone was missing, as someone always was and always will be.

For a second, he felt a sad pang in his heart at the missing spot in their nation, before that pang was stamped down by a dark rage, bruised and snarling, teeth bared and claws out for the lashing. There was cowardice, there was betrayal, and then there was aiding in the murder of your friends for the empty title of ‘king’.

However mad Wilbur was about it, though, he couldn’t deny the valuable lessons that Eret, that Dream, had taught him. Because their attempts at diplomacy were met with death, with betrayal, with the destruction of their nation, and it was only through death that Dream allowed them to be independent.

The server was cruel, Wilbur realised, and L'manberg was built to be kind. They needed to learn how to be cruel, if not them then their leader, the person who needed to be strong enough for them, or the whole country might as well go up in flames-

"You're thinking about it again," Tommy said.

Wilbur turned around, meeting his brother's gaze with an easy smile. "Thinking about what, sorry?" he asked.

"Dying."

Wilbur faltered.

"Not like that," he said quietly. "Don't- don't say it like... that. I'm not- that's not how it is and you know it."

"What are you thinking about, then?" Tommy asked, quirking an eyebrow up at him. "And the answer isn't nothing because I know you, I know when you get all... thought-y and shit." He paused, squinted at Wilbur. "I'm right here, you know. You don't gotta be all cryptic and closed off and all that. I can see directly through your bullshit, you prick."

Wilbur wasn't being cryptic. Wilbur wasn't being closed off. He was being... careful, is all, and Tommy made lots of assumptions, too many for comfort, and some of them just happened to land on Wilbur's shaky little bullseye.

"You died, Tommy," he said quietly. "You died, and I had to watch you die. Twice. You died twice, and I've got two chances left for me but you're- you- " he shut his mouth.

"But I don't," Tommy finished for him, just as sombrely.

Breathing felt difficult. All of a sudden, he found that he could no longer hold Tommy's gaze. For all that he was a naïve and idealistic little kid, Tommy was anything but stupid when it came to other people. His eyes, bright and smart, drilled directly under Wilbur's skin and walls, and surely he was smart enough to realise a denial when he saw it.

"And what am I going to do when- if I outlive you?" Wilbur asked.

"What will I do if I outlive you, too?" Tommy replied.

This wasn't something that felt as cut and dry as he wanted it to be. Death was a constant, but it came at all the most inopportune moments, and Wilbur hated the unpredictable more than he hated himself. He felt his one missing life like an open wound in his heart, and he would never understand how Tommy felt with two.

Tommy shrugged half-heartedly, leaning back in his seat. "I don't know, Wil, neither of us can really answer these kinds of questions," he continued. His eyes dimmed as he looked away. "I don't think anyone can."

Hours later he woke up, jolting awake to the sound of furious knocking. Wilbur blinked the bleariness out of his eyes, stood up with his head spinning and his back hurting — he had fallen asleep against a wall instead of on the bed — and stumbled downstairs to the front door clicking open to reveal Tubbo.

And Tubbo looked exhausted.

His eyes were bloodshot red with grey bags under them, face flushed and hair messy. He stood swaying on his hoofed feet, looking like he would topple over with the slightest nudge.

There was still blood on his clothes.

Tommy's blood, Wilbur realised. He blinked rapidly.

But Tubbo didn't look like he was there to commit murder. He didn't look angry in the slightest, just tired. And Wilbur wasn't afraid of him, just tired. He wasn't sure which was the better alternative.

"Hey, big man," Tubbo said. His voice was rough. Rough, but much kinder than it'd been before.

"Tubbo," Wilbur greeted curtly. His own voice wasn't any better, morning rasp mixed together with thirteen years' worth of disuse.

"Look, I'll be frank — I shouldn't have snapped at you." His hands were clenched together by his sides. "We- we clearly got off on the wrong foot, there, so, I came here to... clear the air a little."

"Okay," Wilbur said. "It's okay. I shouldn't have... intruded."

Tubbo nodded at him. "Right." They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. Tubbo cleared his throat, then said, "How's being alive treating you?"

"I don't know," Wilbur replied honestly.

(Tubbo's horns had grown out, Wilbur realised.

He thought that maybe he should recoil in disgust at the way they curled around his head, behind his ears, reminiscent of another ram hybrid he would be glad never to meet again.

But here, now, looking at the way Tubbo's shoulders sag, at the way he looked up at Wilbur in caution, in hope — he couldn't feel anything but the same utter exhaustion.)

Being alive was... it hurts.

Limbo was dark, yes, and limbo was lonely, boring, was nothing but a long wait that amounted to jack shit. But it gave him the rest that he wanted. Limbo was the void that ate at his rough edges to smooth them over. It snaked its fingers in his fire-riddled memories, it

cleared his head for thirteen long years, and it embraced him like a mother would embrace her child. It was the home that he stumbled into unexpectedly — there he did not need to belong; he only needed to *be*, and after a while he did not even need to be anything but a sleeping speck of the universe.

Wilbur grimaced, and settled on, “It’s cold.”

As if to prove his point, his body shivered.

“I’ll get you some thick clothes,” Tubbo offered. By the way he trembled, too, Wilbur wasn’t sure whether thick clothes would help at all. He half-expected to look down and see frostbite eating away at their fingertips. “There’s a communal bathroom by the farm — you can freshen up, wash your clothes, maybe take a shower. You, uh, you look like you need one.”

Wilbur nodded. “Thank you, Tubbo, but... I’m good.”

Tubbo looked at him for a moment. His eyes narrowed just the slightest bit, and his mouth thinned into a line.

“There is a communal bathroom by the farm,” he repeated, and Wilbur knew a command when he heard one, “you’re going to wash your clothes and take a shower.”

Underneath that, which they both heard: *you will not waste away like you once did.*

And unspoken, which they didn’t: *he wouldn’t want you to.*

Tubbo’s eyes were fixed on Wilbur’s hands — Wilbur’s hands, which were also stained with blood.

Tommy’s blood, he remembered. His head spun.

“Okay,” he said.

Tubbo nodded and started to turn away.

“Wait,” Wilbur blurted out, because there was something he didn’t quite understand yet, “why do you trust me?”

Tubbo stopped. The shadows under his eyes were dark, were deep, were mirrored under Wilbur’s own eyes. And there it was again, that deep festered anger; his features contorted into a mix of disgust and discomfort, and he looked like he would rather be anywhere else. Wilbur didn’t blame him this time, either — he seemed to have that effect on people.

“I *don’t*,” Tubbo said. “I don’t trust you not to hurt either me, or Ranboo, or, or.” He paused. “And I don’t trust you not to be the selfish piece of shit that you were.”

And the truth was: he deserved it. He deserved it, and he knew, and the admission didn’t hurt him like a needle wouldn’t hurt a man on fire.

He knew that they didn't want him back, and this was the only affirmation he needed to be sure of that fact. They didn't want him here, and neither did he, but he was alive anyway despite all odds — he was alive, and Tommy was not. Tommy wanted to live, Tommy was a better person than Wilbur could ever pretend to be, and the fact remained that he was alive but his brother was not, and Wilbur hadn't seen him for far too long and would never see him again.

But there was something else- something else that kept his breath from freezing in his chest, a sentiment held back by the rift they dug between them. This *something* felt like kindling; it was the kind of old, weary bravery that formed his words for him and lined his throat with spikes all the way down to his diaphragm.

And Wilbur felt tired, despite his best efforts, tired and hurt in way too many places all at the same time. He learnt, a long time ago, that he was not strong, *despite his best efforts*, at least not strong enough to take all of that pain in stride.

So he nodded.

“I’ll kill you,” Tubbo whispered. “If you try to hurt me or Ranboo, if you leave Snowchester without either of us, if we even *suspect* you trying anything.” He paused. His eyelashes were wet, clumped together, bits of frost hanging onto the sides of his eyes. “I’ve lost- I’ve *seen* enough death today.”

Wilbur waited. This was that something else, hidden far beneath layers of skin and layers of grief.

“Don’t- don’t make me kill you,” Tubbo said.

There were no façades between them, no fronts to maintain when the both of them had been flayed a thousand times over. Tubbo was an honest person, and right now he was too tired to lie; here’s the twist: so was Wilbur.

“Will you trust me,” Wilbur asked, his voice far steadier than he felt, “to be hurt enough?”

A long time ago, Tubbo had been his brother too.

A long time ago, unconditional trust had felt like unconditional love, and Wilbur found it a lot easier to pretend like he had always been a hateful person.

A long time ago, Tubbo wouldn’t have hesitated to say *yes*.

Now he hesitated. Now he looked Wilbur in the eye, mirror to mirror, a shade to a shadow, unforgivably human in the way he trembled. There was conviction in his eyes, studying and searching and gears rusted and straining to turn. In a way, he was the only person that could understand Wilbur, the only person that Wilbur could understand.

The both of them knew this.

“In a few days, I’m going to go to his house and sort through his items,” Tubbo said, after a long, tense moment.

It was not a no, but it was not a yes, either. Wilbur read between the lines; it was an invitation. Tubbo might not trust him, but Wilbur knew that he trusted the fact that loss was a language they both needed to speak.

Tubbo swallowed, hard, and Wilbur took the invitation like a beast left to starve for weeks.

“I want you to come with me.”

“Well,” Tommy started, “that was a fuckin’ mess.”

Wilbur clenched the ballot in his hands, knuckles turning white from the force of his grip. They’d started with a single party, their party, and Wilbur was stupid because of course he was — he made a mistake, and he thought he could get away with it, and now he was paying the price for it — and now he had not one, but three competitors.

“I feel like ‘mess’ is an understatement, Tommy,” he said. He exhaled and closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose with two fingers. “I can’t believe it, Quackity and his- and-and now Schlatt too, how are we going to-“

“Niki and Fundy, Wilbur,” Tommy muttered. “they’re running against you, too.”

Wilbur opened his mouth, then closed it. Outside the walls, he could hear Fundy and Niki laughing and celebrating together with Quackity.

His heart twisted in his chest and he pressed his mouth into a thin line. He was scared, yes, but most of all he remembered how Fundy looked like up on the stage with his chin tipped towards the sky and his eyes glimmering with defiance, and he couldn’t tell his son ‘no’ when Fundy was every bit a wild thing with mischief in his bones and ambition in his bared teeth. He looked at Niki, righteous fire burning in her, the drive to change things, the drive to make better, make good, and he loved her because she was his best friend, his equal — he wouldn’t dare bar her from her own dreams.

“So they are,” Wilbur said, “and that’s fine- it’s whatever, they... Fundy and Niki can make their own decisions, Tommy.”

‘Pride’ was a reach and ‘approval’ felt scant — whatever he felt towards the pair, he felt it right alongside hurt unfurling in his chest. For Fundy, for Niki, for his people, anything, and for as long as he was alive, everything.

“But what are we gonna do, Wil?” Tommy asked. He had his back turned to the entrance to L’manberg. He couldn’t see the joy in their competitors’ faces at the prospect of wrenching his nation from him.

Wilbur could.

"We'll be fine," he said, wrenching his lips up to a smile. "I mean, people like you a lot, Tommy, they'll vote for us. We built this place, right, we're worrying about nothing, man."

"And what about you?" Tommy asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Wilbur shrugged. His cheeks were beginning to hurt and his hands shook. "I'm their President," he said easily, because it was true, and it explained everything he didn't want to admit. "Look, it's going to be fine, right Tommy? You trust me, right?"

"Course I do," Tommy said. "Do you?"

Wilbur sucked in a breath.

"In you?" he said, instead. "Sure. Always."

A few days turned into a week, and in that week, Wilbur learned how to live again.

The first time he got around to taking a shower, he stood under the water for far too long and didn't get out until the pads of his fingers wrinkled up and his back felt numb. He washed his clothes as Tubbo had told him to do, wore a thicker coat and thicker pants and felt only marginally warmer.

He worked for Tubbo and Ranboo. Every day without fail, Ranboo showed up at his door and gave him a task for the day — he'd have stone to mine for the wall or wood to chop for the mansion or crops to harvest from the farm, and sometimes Tubbo would find him and get him to help them build their wall or ask him for advice on décor.

In exchange, they allowed him to wander Snowchester to his heart's content, as long as he never wandered beyond its borders. He frequented the shorelines, toeing the waves and letting the freezing water lap at his feet to chain him to reality. He avoided a grave next to a tower on a little hill, though, kept away from it like the mere thought of being within its vicinity felt like venom dripping into his chest, burning him through down to his stomach. Whatever he needed for food and tools and blocks, they let him take from their resources, too, as long as he provided them their fixed quota daily.

And laborious as it was to get up everyday and undertake physical work, he found that he enjoyed the repetition, the intimate effort of figuring out how to work his fine motor skills once again.

His body had forgotten how to be alive, and so had he, but neither of them had a choice in the matter.

When his hands proved to be too uncooperative, this was where Ranboo came in. The hybrid was always there at the corner of his eyes, pretending like he wasn't watching Wilbur's every move. There was always a sword strapped to his side, still made of Netherite and still

bursting with magic, but he never took it out to use against Wilbur again. Instead, he descended their quarry and helped Wilbur carry the weight of stacks of stone when he shook too hard, wracked through with tremors that rooted from the heart.

This was how Ranboo, for him, stopped being a memory and started being a reality.

(*A companion. He didn't dare say 'friend'.*)

Ranboo was eighteen, first of all.

He was a kid, and there were scars beneath his eyes, lines stretching all the way down his cheeks like tear tracks.

He was an enderman hybrid, which explained the scars, and everyone in the server liked him, which didn't.

He was married to Tubbo, and the both of them were trying to learn Piglin. Wilbur thought about the thumping sounds coming from their attic and in a bout of courage, he offered to teach Ranboo the basics of the language.

By no means was he good at it, let alone fluent, but judging by the way Ranboo's lip twitched with something like genuine gratitude, he was sure he made the right call.

Most importantly, Ranboo was a good kid.

He was a tentative person, careful with his words and careful with the way he held himself around other people. He spoke to Wilbur kindly; no doubt that he knew what kind of a person Wilbur was, but Ranboo never judged him beyond how he treated people. His eyes shone when Wilbur began thanking him for help and scary as his threats were, Wilbur noticed they always began with '*If you hurt anyone here*'.

Tubbo was lucky to have him, Wilbur thought. They needed more good people in the world.

"Day of reckoning, big guy. You excited?"

Tommy grimaced at the audience. "More like batshit scared," he grumbled, "but you didn't hear it from me."

"Didn't hear anything," Wilbur said, chuckling.

He met Tubbo's eye in the audience and waved at him as the president of clean-pressed suits and charming grins. Behind his ramrod back, he held the ballot in stiff hands, trembling fingers; he could still feel the tear tracks down his cheeks from the night before, counting votes and feeling his heart plummet to his feet.

He looked around himself at the other parties — at Schlatt and the horns curling around his ears, at Quackity and George smirking back at him, at Fundy and Niki and the determination on their faces — and then he looked at the audience, his people, his trusted, loyal people.

A low anger simmered in him, flickered to life months ago when he died in a blackstone room, and as much as he tried to contain it, he couldn't ignore the toxic fumes it sent up his lungs.

L'manberg was his and his alone — its values his to uphold, its foundations his to build on, its people his to protect, their ambitions his to fulfil, their fears his to quell, their burden his to carry, his and his alone — because he swore, anything and everything, and he was the only one who realised this, who was strong enough to realise this.

And yet he held the results in his hands. He felt the nation's heart beating beside his. He knew how tonight would end, and the people wanted what the people wanted, so he'd give them everything they needed.

"We'll be fine," he said, reaching out to squeeze Tommy's shoulder. "Have a little faith in me, big guy. Whatever happens today, Tommy, you and me — we're both in this together, alright? We've always got each other's backs, yeah?"

Tommy nodded and straightened his back. He puffed out his chest and beamed up at Wilbur — Wilbur's eyes couldn't help but flick down to the edge of a scar poking out from Tommy's collarbone.

"Good lad," Wilbur said, and he stepped up to the podium. He looked out at his people, gave them his best smile.

Wilbur opened the envelope, and history was sealed.

After almost two weeks of avoidance, Tubbo showed up at his doorstep and told him to empty his inventory of everything. He carried a trident and wore Netherite boots that glimmered with enchantments, and the set of his jaw clued Wilbur in to the idea that he was probably carrying a whole set of weapons, either to protect them from the world or to protect the world from Wilbur.

Still, he obliged, and he carried with him nothing but the clothes on his back. Tubbo led him to a water tunnel and instructed him to hang on tightly, putting emphasis on *tightly*.

Wilbur wrapped his arms around Tubbo's torso and interlocked his fingers for good measure. Tubbo thrusted his trident into the water, and-

-for a second Wilbur couldn't breathe-

-then they fell over onto solid ground, and Wilbur ate dirt as inertia flung him off of Tubbo. He heaved himself up on one elbow and breathed for a second — hacked out water from his lungs and swallowed down the burn at the back of his trachea.

“You good?” Tubbo asked, already on his feet. “Should’ve warned you, sorry.”

“I was a corpse not two weeks ago, Tubbo,” Wilbur replied. He pushed himself up to his feet. No matter how much he inhaled, it felt as though he couldn’t quite fill up the entirety of his lungs. “I still haven’t quite gotten used to, to being alive.”

Tubbo nodded at him. His face was pinched. “Right.” A pause. “Let’s go.”

He led Wilbur onto the Prime Path, and it felt like coming home. It felt like the world was clicking back into place and the world was wrapping around him, like he had been a cardboard cutout of the server and it was only now, as he stepped back onto the familiar oak planks, that he felt the SMP welcoming him back as one of its own.

(At the end of the day, the SMP was home, and its members were family. A family, yes, but a broken one, a family that hated each other and had, on much more than one occasion, taken each other’s lives.

There was merit in holding onto family and never giving up, but there was also merit in knowing when you have lost a fight for good.

Tubbo and Ranboo were expanding the walls of Snowchester. Wilbur recognised a demand for solitude when he saw one.)

In death, there was more than just grief.

There was the emptiness, the waking up in the morning to silence, the glancing to his right only to find no one there, the expecting someone to finish his sentences.

There were the routines, the rituals of cleaning the body and burying it and holding a funeral for someone who wasn’t even there to witness it, the eulogies and the obituaries and the deconstruction of someone else’s life into ink and paper.

There was the anticipation, and Wilbur felt this most of all as he stepped into Tommy’s house and braced himself for a tackle or a shout, but there was nothing, no one to greet him.

In front of him, Tubbo breathed, hands white and clenched around his trident.

“Look through his- the basement,” Tubbo muttered. “I’ll look through the chests here. And the contents of his enderchest too.” His head was turned away from Wilbur, eyes fixed onto the floor. He paused, and then added, “I have emergency access to it.”

Wilbur nodded. “Okay,” he said, weakly, “what are we looking for, exactly?”

Tubbo made a noise at the back of his throat, and gestured lamely with a hand. “Just, you know,” he said, “anything that might’ve- I don’t know, meant something.”

His shoulders were tense, legs locked stiff on the ground, and Wilbur understood his loss for words, because there weren't any words to describe a ritual beyond *it's what we have to do*.

He nodded again anyway, and left Tubbo shivering at Tommy's front door.

As soon as he breached the basement, the temperature dropped a dangerous amount. Wilbur didn't know how much of it was in his head. He shivered, pulled his Snowchester coat tighter around himself, and stepped further into the room. He spent a long time standing with his eyes locked on the floor, imagining Tommy here, Tommy alive, Tommy sorting the junk in his chests, before he stirred his limbs into action.

The first chest yielded nothing but stacks of dirt, wood, and stone.

The second was a chest of tools, none of which were named or enchanted or looked familiar enough to feel sentimental.

The third was filled with building blocks and several empty potion bottles.

The last chest was full of cobblestone.

He allowed himself a moment of wistfulness as he stared at Tommy's favourite block in the world, then sighed. His breath came out fogged. There was no way a basement was *that* cold, especially considering the warm biome that Tommy had built his house in.

(*Not unless there was something else here with him.*

Memories crept into the edges of his consciousness, memories of grey skin and floaty thoughts and feeling- being ice-cold everywhere he went.)

He pressed his lips into a thin line, took a deep breath, and closed the chest.

There was nothing here. Nothing in these chests that *meant anything*, and his inventory stayed empty and all of him felt empty, too.

Wilbur buried his head in his hands, rubbed the corners of his eyes until they hurt, and then dragged his hands slowly down his face. He looked up. The chest was open.

A part of him fell to the bottom of his feet.

He clenched his fists — his palms were fucking *freezing* — and counted backwards from ten. He closed the chest with a determined sort of finality, and stepped away for good measure.

The chest clicked open, and Wilbur felt faint down to the bone.

“What the fuck,” he said quietly. He stared at the cobblestone stacked up in the chest, he stared at all the memories of watching Tommy build his annoying little towers with the material, and they stared back at him.

He shut his eyes as his throat closed up. Blindly, he reached forward and slammed the lid close, putting all his body weight on it.

A cold feeling pressed on his forearms, and Wilbur flinched back in time to hear the chest creak open once again. He staggered backwards, swallowing down something sour and hysterical that rose up in his throat.

“No,” he muttered, shaking his head wildly.

His back hit the wall, and he let himself slide down its length until he was sitting, clutching his hair in his hands and trembling violently from the cold, from the fear, from the sinking knowledge that was all-too-desperate on latching itself to him.

‘*Wilbur*,’ whispered a familiar voice, too distant and too close to his ears.

He cried out.

Something stood just over him, a pair of boots that flickered in and out of vision, greyed out, far too transparent to look right, and the hairs on the back of Wilbur’s neck stood rigidly up.

‘*Wil-buh*,’ said the voice again, light and mocking, almost sing-songed his name for him, ‘*Wilbur!*’

“Fuck you,” Wilbur gasped, “*fuck off*,” before he lost all the breath in his chest and passed out.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: wilbur faces his grief head-on.

leave a kudos if you enjoyed this chapter :D!!

ashes for ashes

Chapter Summary

But what was true — and Tommy knew this, which was why he refused to stop believing every bit of it; he needed Wilbur to know it too — was that Wilbur hated himself, first and foremost, and every drop of poison that spattered out of him was the byproduct of overflow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You know,” Tubbo said, “if I got a nickel every time I had to carry someone back to Snowchester, I’d have two nickels.”

“Which isn’t a lot, but it’s weird that it happened twice?” Wilbur finished for him, curled up in his bed with his back against the wall and his knees hugged close to his chest.

There was a black smudge in the air beside Tubbo, a vaguely-humanoid shape that sometimes looked like Tommy, sometimes not. The smudge became clearer when Wilbur looked at it from the corner of his eyes, blending into the blur of his periphery.

Tubbo didn’t answer. He kept his gaze steady on Wilbur’s face, cheeks flushed pink and frost in his hair. He didn’t acknowledge the fact that the smudge was there at all, either, ignored it fervently. Wilbur wondered if he was already going insane *again*.

“I’m sorry, Tubbo,” Wilbur said, because he didn’t know what else to say.

“No, *I’m* sorry,” Tubbo muttered, “it was a bad joke anyway.”

‘*This whole thing is a bad joke,*’ the smudge said, in Tommy’s voice, ‘*you guys aren’t being all that funny.*’

“Did you find anything?” Wilbur asked, clenching his fists and fixing his eyes on Tubbo.

Tubbo shrugged in a way that made Wilbur think it was both a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’, like he tried to deny a yes while denying a no, like he was proud and embarrassed and he buried both under a heavy, heavy layer of hurt.

“Not really,” was what Tubbo said, “I found his valuables, like, you know, diamonds and emeralds and the like. Some old weapons he hasn’t used in ages. When he, uh-” he coughed, flinging his gaze to the side, right where the smudge was but not quite looking *at* it, “when... when we got him back from Pandora’s Vault, Sam handed us his armour and tools and the stuff he was carrying on him.”

Sam. Wilbur wasn't all that familiar with the name, but the image of a creeper hybrid clad in gold and Netherite, a distant ally in the rebellion against Manberg. Another image imposed on top of that one, an image of a warden also clad in gold and Netherite, standing imposing and motionless against a black prison backdrop.

He let Tommy die, a part of him hissed in his ears, *Tommy is dead because of him*, and as much as Wilbur wanted to listen to it and place the blame on Sam's shoulders, he knew that there wasn't anyone here to blame but himself. He let Tommy die, too, *twice*, and the fact that now, *now* Tommy was dead but Wilbur wasn't, was probably a testament to the idea that he let Tommy die a third time. He might as well have killed his brother himself.

"But the rest of his items must still be in Pandora's Vault," Tubbo continued, still not looking at Wilbur, still looking through the smudge. "Sam mentioned that they... those items... were so important to him, that he- he didn't want to risk carrying them in to meet Dream."

"He was going in to see Dream?" Wilbur asked. "Why?"

Tubbo made a noise at the back of his throat, like a wail he aborted far too soon. What came out instead was a hitched breath.

The smudge moved. Not really, but Wilbur *felt* him move, felt the annoyance emanating off him like it was tangible. He pictured it clear as day — Tommy rolling his eyes and blowing air through his mouth and saying '*bruh*' in the kind of deep, shaky voice that no one but Technoblade could nail down.

Tubbo coughed. Wilbur snapped his attention back to the kid.

"I don't know," he said, in a way that made Wilbur think he *did* know, but didn't want Wilbur to know. As if Wilbur wasn't privy to this bit of information. "He goes in to see Dream at least once a week," he said, "Prime knows why he does it." A pause, where his face soured up. "*Used to. Sorry.*"

"Right," Wilbur said, feeling his throat close up.

He connected the dots himself. Dream must've killed Tommy, then, and revived Wilbur to rub salt in the wound. Maybe he expected Wilbur to be grateful to be alive or something, maybe he expected Wilbur to free him from the Prison, maybe he expected Wilbur to be the same broken person he was some thirteen-odd years ago.

And Wilbur could see it in his mind's eye: in another life, maybe, Tommy would be alive and Wilbur would be happy to live, would be hailing Dream as his hero and would be parading the jagged edges of his brokenness like a trophy, would be locking the tender facets of his true, wretched self under lock and key.

The reality was that this wasn't another life, this was all he had left.

The reality was that Tommy was dead, Wilbur was alive and unhappily so, and Dream was the last thing he wanted to think about.

The reality was that Wilbur was still broken, but he was a different, quieter sort of broken, and he held his cracks close to his chest and left the rest of himself open for the world to pick apart, that he had pain written all over him and he was sitting in a room with someone who did, too.

“Why *did* you collapse, anyway?” Tubbo asked. There was half-lidded concern in his eyes. The other half felt accusing.

Wilbur didn’t know how to tell him that there was a ghost next to him — but not quite a ghost, he thought, because Tubbo was either ignoring the smudge or he couldn’t see it at all and Wilbur was very quickly losing faith in the former idea — so he said, “I hadn’t eaten at all today,” which wasn’t technically a lie.

Tubbo narrowed his eyes like he was looking straight through Wilbur’s bullshit. He always had a penchant for that. “Don’t,” he grit out, “*do* that. Don’t skip out on your meals.”

At any moment, Tubbo could run him through with a sword. Wilbur knew he wouldn’t, though, just as much as he was sure Tubbo and Ranboo would never kick him out of Snowchester.

He nodded anyway. “Okay. Sorry.”

‘*Damn right you are,*’ the smudge muttered, and Wilbur flinched. He half-expected his breath to start fogging over again.

“Have you been showering?” Tubbo asked, demanded. When Wilbur nodded, he pressed on. “And your clothes? Have you been laundering them?”

“Every day,” Wilbur replied. He knew exactly what Tubbo was doing. He couldn’t say he wasn’t endeared at all.

“What about water? Sleep?”

Wilbur fought back the twitch in his lips. He nodded twice.

Tubbo leaned back in his seat, satisfied. “You need to take care of yourself, big man. No one else can do it for you.”

“I try my best. Today was just... let’s call it an outlier. You caught me off guard, is all.”

“Don’t make the outlier a habit, alright? This is a one-time thing and a one-time thing only, you hear me?”

“Yessir,” Wilbur said, and saluted for good measure.

Tubbo exhaled and mirrored the salute quickly. They fell easily back into old banter, old habits, old ways of looking out for each other, old in the sense that dilapidated blackstone walls were old, were forgotten, old in the way that they’d nearly scrubbed out of themselves. It hurt, but the sting tasted like nostalgia, and it was funny how the thing that had them

coming back to each other could've easily been the thing that tore them apart. Wilbur was grateful.

"But what about you?" Wilbur asked, in turn. "Have you? Been, uh, been taking care of yourself, I mean. Have you been doing alright?"

"*Alright* is a stretch but... I'm doing." Tubbo smiled tentatively. It was the first one Wilbur had seen in more than thirteen years. "Ranboo's been making sure I don't skip out on self-care. He's got me."

"And him?"

"I've got him, too," Tubbo said, like it explained everything.

Wilbur nodded. "I'm glad."

The smudge bristled beside him, and Wilbur felt goosebumps all the way down to his feet.

"Alright then," Tubbo said, slapping his palms on his lap, "I need to get going."

He stood up and rolled his shoulders. His face was carefully neutral, pleasant although a little wary, but there were still traces of that smile on his lips. Wilbur followed him downstairs, keeping a tight grip on the railing as his legs shook.

At the doorway, Tubbo turned back to face him. "It's been good seeing you, big guy," he said. The confidence in his eyes spelled out sincerity, and this brought Wilbur more of a relief than any words of assurance could. "Have you got any food with you?"

"Yeah," Wilbur replied. "I'll be fine."

This was a promise. Shaky as it was, Tubbo had to believe him.

Tubbo nodded back at him, and then he turned around. No goodbyes. Wilbur watched him leave, blinking numbly at the sight of his retreating back. Tubbo disappeared into the forest by his mansion, and Wilbur sighed, stepping back into his house to shut the door.

As soon as he closed the door, the temperature in the room dropped, and his heart fell with it.

He whirled around. The smudge hovered by his staircase.

"You're not real," Wilbur growled with all the hair on his arms stood up. "What the fuck are you- what are you *doing* here-?"

His chest felt sore, felt bruised, felt loose and unable to hold all the air in like it used to, felt like the sword had taken too much out of him and he couldn't hope to get it all back.

'*You were literally a ghost,*' said Tommy's voice, echoing in the space between Wilbur's brain and his ears. '*You literally called yourself Ghostbur and now you're convinced I'm not real?*'

"I'm going insane, I'm literally going insane," Wilbur said. "You sound just like him. I am actually going nuts right now."

'It's because I am him, dipshit. Pull yourself together!'

"My second delusional break in six months. This has got to break some sort of record."

'You're sick in the fuckin' head.'

Wilbur shook his head and swallowed. "You're not real."

'Fuck you,' the smudge said, and then it sighed exasperatedly, sending a sudden chill down Wilbur's spine.

A pause.

"Tell me something I wouldn't know, then," Wilbur said, if only to fill up the silence. It grated on his nerves, and he wished more than anything that he had a jukebox in his house. "If you're so convinced that you're real. Tell me something only you would know."

The smudge sighed again, but this time, Wilbur didn't shiver as violently.

'Fine. You're twisting my words but whatever,' he said. The smudge stopped to think, and in that pause Wilbur almost interjected to break the silence. *'Back in Pogtopia, when you were going all crazy 'n shit, I was going behind your back with Tubbo, with Niki, to stop you from pressing the button. But we... we never really did anything.'*

Wilbur sat on the floor, his back to his front door. He blinked away the memories of the rebellion, tried to forget days spent drowning in paranoia, in loathing, and shutting himself away from the people trying to reach him.

(There existed a ravine west of L'manberg's crater, like a scar in the Earth that Prime Themself had torn into the ground as a monument of the nation's failures — there existed a scar across Wilbur's chest, a wound knitted over with gold and ash and bursting with longing, a reminder of everything that he'd already lost and would lose.)

"You're acting like I didn't know that already," he spat. His knuckles were white, hands clenched around his knees. "I knew what you were doing. I knew I couldn't trust you, the lot of you."

'They were going to detain you after we won. They wanted to put you on trial and lock you up,' the smudge said, *'but I thought you still should've been the president.'*

Wilbur pulled his lips up and bared his teeth into the mockery of a smile. It felt familiar and painful all the same, fit on his lips like it was always meant to be there. "Well, you thought wrong," he sneered, "I would've destroyed it one way or another. I would've led us all to destruction." He laughed mirthlessly, pulling his limbs closer to himself. "I didn't want to destroy *Tubbo's L'manberg*, you know?"

The smudge inhaled slowly, deeply, holding his breath for a long moment before he let go.

'I know that too,' he said, voice so soft that Wilbur could barely hear it. He stepped forward, his footsteps rattling across the floor, and stopped just short of Wilbur's feet. *'I wanted to believe better for you.'*

"You know better than to do that," Wilbur said. "You know better than to expect me to even want to be here."

He glared up at Tommy, who met his eyes with the kind of serenity that only a dead person could muster. He was smiling, Wilbur could tell, but Wilbur could also feel the waves upon waves of sadness, *pity*, pouring out of him.

'Wilbur, why are you trying to hurt me?' Tommy asked gently. *'I'm already dead.'*

Wilbur blinked, and the smudge was gone. Gone like he was never there in the first place, and Wilbur could no longer entertain the possibility that he'd been hallucinating the ghost at all, because under no circumstance would any part of him — imaginary or otherwise — be averse to self-destruction.

The room was far, far too quiet.

He breathed, and it hurt; the air burned in his lungs and his fingers were shaking when he unclenched them.

Breathing hurt. Existing hurt.

Everything hurt, and the sight of his brother made the ache come back with a vengeance tenfold.

"Tommy?" he called out, his voice thick.

There was no answer. Wilbur buried his head between his knees.

"Wil, I'm gonna need you to shut up, okay? You don't get to dictate what I can and can't do."

Wilbur blinked. A few steps down the stairs, Tommy looked up at him with his eyebrows scrunched, a hand pressing against his in-ear communicator. Wilbur gripped his own like a lifeline, one hand on the wall to steady himself. Surely, Fundy knew what he was doing, he burnt the flag, he destroyed the walls, but surely, surely he did it for a reason, surely he hadn't just left Wilbur in the dust-?

He opened his mouth to retort, but Schlatt was there first, his accented words ringing out his communicator and grinding its way into his brain.

"Oh?" Schlatt drawls. Wilbur could hear the smug smile through his voice. "Fundy, what are your... relations... to one Wilbur Soot? I heard somewhere down the grapevine that there's

something going on between you and him. Maybe a bit of... family?"

"No," Fundy said, voice clipped. "You heard wrong."

Wilbur blinked again, faster and harder.

"I was born in the nation that he founded. That's all there is to it."

Wilbur's mouth moved faster than his brain did.

"Fundy, you know that's not..." he said softly, but Schlatt started to speak over him, and then his ears started to ring and suddenly he wasn't sure if he was strong enough to hold his own body weight and Tommy was moving up the stairs towards him and his grip loosened itself around his communicator and it fell, down, down, down-

His communicator shattered into pieces far below him. He couldn't hear anything — not Fundy, not Schlatt, and when he looked up at Tommy's moving mouth he realised he couldn't hear Tommy either.

He pushed himself off the wall, ripped away from Tommy, and started ascending the spiral staircase to the foyer. He needed to get away from there. His steps felt distant, like he was wearing far too many layers of clothing around himself, but at the same time he felt too naked, too exposed, as if the moment he descended Pogtopia's ravine for the first time, he lost everything that made him warm, and now the cold bit harshly into his skin, curled itself around his neck and started to squeeze tighter and tighter by the minute.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't hear. He strode up the stairs and into the foyer and threw open the door to catch some fresh air, and his ears rang and he couldn't feel anything but a stabbing cold, either. His skin crawled with invisible eyes, millions of thoughts brushing against him and getting swept away under the overwhelming tinnitus.

Something was wrong. Something was always wrong, of course, but he couldn't have just heard what he did, but it was sinking into him and why were his hands shaking, but he didn't know where he went wrong and still he walked onwards away from the eyes on the back of his neck. Something was wrong, and he wasn't sure he could fix it, because surely not, surely his son didn't just betray him, disown him, the flag and the walls were one thing but to hear him say it, to hear his voice so full of hate when he'd been raised to be loved-

He spun around, meeting a pair of striking cyan eyes. Or more likely, someone spun him around, and it was Tommy surely, Tommy with both hands firmly on his shoulder and Tommy's mouth moving with words he couldn't hear. He stopped moving, though, because he couldn't really leave, and he stopped and he looked at Tommy and his ears were still ringing.

Tommy's hands moved down his shoulders, thumbing down his arms and elbows until Tommy's hands met his own, and Tommy's fingers slowly worked under his fingers, and he let Tommy do whatever he wanted, and Tommy pressed their palms flat together and his mouth started to move.

Tommy's mouth was moving. Tommy was repeating a phrase. Tommy, Tommy, Tommy, was here, was holding him.

His eyes blinked and flickered to their hands. He had ten fingers. Tommy was telling him to count. He counted in his head, one to ten, one number for each finger against Tommy's, and then he did it again, out loud with a voice he didn't know he had, and then he did it again, and again, and again. He counted, and his ears were ringing, but he could hear Tommy speaking to him.

"-Wilbur, my name is Tommy, and you have ten fingers. We are in the woods right now, you are safe, and I am with you," Tommy said, enunciating every syllable. Tommy nodded at him as he counted, brows scrunching together in focus. "Again. Your name is Wilbur, my name is Tommy, and you have ten fingers. We are in the woods, you are safe, and-

"Tommy," Wilbur muttered. He felt weak down to his knees. "Tommy?"

He blinked, exhaled shakily, and closed his hands, intertwining his fingers between Tommy's. He squeezed for a second, and then let go, letting his hands drop at his sides.

"Tommy, what the hell just happened?"

Tommy gripped his shoulders again, forcing their eyes to meet. "Wilbur," he said, "I'm so sorry."

"Tommy, that was, what the hell," Wilbur said, "I don't understand, I just- he-?"

His voice broke at the last word. He shuddered, legs giving out as he crumpled onto the floor.

"That was my son," he said, but that was no longer true, so he said, instead, "that was Fundy," and buried his head in his hands and clutched at his hair.

Tommy dropped with him, hands still on his shoulders. "I'm so sorry, Wilbur," he said, and the pain in his face betrayed the neutrality in his voice, "I'm so, so sorry."

"Fundy," Wilbur whispered, because he'd loved and been betrayed, once, and foolish as he was he made the same mistake and been betrayed the same way again, "Fundy, what have I done," because he was a parent, he was a parent, he used to be a parent and he could never have been strong enough to foster a child let alone lose one, "Fundy, oh Prime, Fundy, why-?"

Tommy held him on the forest floor. That was the most he could have done, and yet his most was not nearly enough to keep Wilbur from shattering.

While they worked in the farm together, Ranboo told him about the server — about L'manberg's third life, about how its crater came to be, about a mysterious red egg going around mind-controlling people, about the Prison and the rumours surrounding its Warden, about everything.

And the more that Wilbur learnt about all the things he'd missed, the more he pieced together one crucial bit of information:

He had been dead for six months.

Not thirteen years, as he had initially thought. In hindsight, he should've realised by looking at Tubbo that the kid hadn't grown into an adult in his late-twenties. But by the way he held himself and the way his face kept sagging, he could've aged centuries and Wilbur would not have batted an eye.

This crucial bit of information kickstarted an odd mix of emotions in him.

A part of him was relieved. This part was selfish — selfish in that he was glad the world hadn't yet moved on without him. This part was protective, was possessive, was glad that he hadn't left his people without him to be with them for thirteen years. This part was desperate, grasping at straws that were no longer there, straws that he burnt and let go and basked in the gentle darkness that came after.

Another part of him, bigger and louder, was terrified — shock and fear and clawing, freezing terror all curdling up inside him, an ugly feeling that reared its head up like a snake and reminded him that everything went wrong because he hadn't been there, everything went wrong because he left, everything went wrong because he meddled in the first place and he, him alone, he was the disease that had its claws in the foundations of the server and he was the factor in all the equations that once written down, had already ruined everything it touched, had touched, would touch-

You did it, you outlived him, came a stray thought, whispering into his ear like a gentle caress.

His mind quieted.

Bits of him frayed into the air, smoke in the wind and smoke trapped in the ashes of a long-forgotten forest fire.

He burned, he was burning, he wanted to burn, and in the aftermath, the only things left behind were his soot-stained fingers, his charred resolve, and the grave by the tower on a little hill.

This thought, this part of him, was small, was quiet, was a miserable little thing. It was the part of him built out of a newfound heartache, a shadow with bruised knees and bruised eyes standing and trembling and tugging at his sleeves for attention.

But it spoke to him, and when it did, he listened.

Its voice was tired, like the rest of him was. It told him about grey wings and pink hair and silly little drug vans. It spoke to him of horn stubs and white eyes and crayon suits, empty bakeries and 3-D glasses and mallard feathers. It reminded him of blue dye, golden hair, a scar on his chest that he would never smooth over completely.

“Oh,” he told Ranboo, because for once he was out of words.

Because Wilbur had been twenty-four when Tommy was sixteen, then Wilbur was dead when Tommy turned seventeen, and now Wilbur was alive, thirteen years too old to be twenty-five, and Tommy was still seventeen.

The numbers didn’t add up, but neither did the facts, and his thoughts were swirling around the shape of a child, a sense of hope — young and naive and untouched, unmarred, unsullied. Wilbur was too young to die. Tubbo was too young to die. All of them were too young to die, to fight, and the crux of the matter was that Tommy was young, *too young*, and now he would never be anything but young.

Wilbur thought about the smudge, about the way it’d looked at him with pity.

“Oh,” Wilbur repeated, like that alone could convey everything he felt.

He couldn’t tell what Ranboo was thinking. He couldn’t read Ranboo’s mind, couldn’t decipher the cloud behind his eyes, couldn’t possibly figure out what he thought of Wilbur now, kneeling over a patch of potatoes and shaking uncontrollably.

Ranboo met his eyes. There was understanding there, and right now that was enough.

“Yeah,” Ranboo said, “*oh*,” and his fingers trembled too.

“Tommy,” Wilbur said quietly, “it’s okay. Let’s just go back to Pogtopia.”

Tommy lowered his bow, and gestured frustratedly at Schlatt on the podium. Wilbur shook his head, setting his lips in a thin line and turning away from the edge of the balcony. He stood up and headed down Eret’s tower as his brother followed, light on his feet.

“Wilbur, I-I could’ve taken the shot,” Tommy muttered. “I had my scope on him, and he wasn’t moving. I could’ve, I could’ve killed him there.”

Wilbur ran a hand through his hair as he walked out of the tower. The sun was setting — beautiful day out for a festival announcement, perfect weather, perfect everything — and he stalked into the forest with his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his coat. Tommy jogged to keep up with his long strides.

“Killing Schlatt wouldn’t do anything,” he said. He felt breathless, cold, and he expected to breathe a fog out at any moment now. “Killing Schlatt would not achieve a single thing,

because Quackity would be the president, and then- and then George would be next, and-“

“Well if I’d killed him, at least that’d be a problem solved, right?” Tommy asked.

“No, look.” He didn’t want blood on Tommy’s hands. There was enough on his own for the both of them. “No, Tommy, I’ve got a question for you.”

Wilbur glanced back at Tommy, who sported a peculiar look on his face, dismay and confusion all in one expression. And Tommy was hopeful, was determined, still gripped his bow in one hand and utter trust in the other. But he was proof — his bow and arrow and murderous intent was proof enough — that they needed to kill, that they could never have returned to their nation without-

“Okay,” Tommy said, “ask away.”

Wilbur slowed his pace as he ducked under a hanging branch. “This festival that Schlatt’s announcing, it seems like, like a good idea, right?” He swallowed. “We- we never had festivals, when I was president. And now he’s holding one, and it looks like he’s doing something good, something people agree with and enjoy and...”

He couldn’t forget how his people looked cheering Schlatt on. Tubbo with his budding horns, Fundy with the prospect of greatness, Niki behind bars, Quackity and the smugness dripping down his face. The sight of it all stung him, stung the darkness behind his eyelids, and it was his people, his people had voted and ran and rallied against him and there had to be a reason, because he thought they’d betrayed him first but they were good people, they wanted peace and they wanted to celebrate, because there was no way he’d been betrayed by all of them, all at once, just like that, unless...

“He’s still a fucking dickhead, though, isn’t he?” Tommy asked, stepping closer.

“No, no, no, you don’t get it,” Wilbur muttered, stepping back. “Schlatt- he’s doing something good, something friendly, and all of them, they’re supporting him, they’ve been supporting him since day one, you don’t-“

There was still a spark in his brother’s eyes. Tommy didn’t see it. Tommy didn’t understand.

Wilbur had to understand for the both of them, had to realise the dark and ugly truth that he’d been avoiding, because everyone betrayed him and there was really only one reason why that happened, because he’d been in the right but the right was a dark place and it’d been so long since he saw light, and suddenly, and suddenly, and suddenly he couldn’t tell where he was going.

And he hadn’t known what he was doing, had led his men into death in the fight for his dreams of freedom and emancipation, had spouted gold-gilded words that wormed their way into his peoples’ hearts, had betrayed them first by trying to cheat their trust, had destroyed all of his relationships, every single one of them, from his friends to his family to his son, his son-!

Now he was fighting someone that people actually liked. Now he was the one with the weapons, intent on destroying whatever peace his country had finally found. Now he understood, and the answer had been right there, all for him to realise.

Everything straightened itself out in his head. He could see it all so, so clearly now. The past, the present, shrouded in darkness as they were — and now the future, his future, laid itself brick by brick in front of him, a road headed directly to hell.

It made sense. It made perfect, logical sense, and he was late to the party when his people saw it first. He didn't know why he hadn't figured it out sooner.

Tommy stepped closer, reached out. An image of russet fur and defiant eyes flashed in his mind, and he flinched away from his brother.

(Traitors, all of them.)

His hands shook. They'd been shaking for so, so long.

"Tommy," he breathed, "are we the bad guys?"

The next time he saw Tommy again, it was out of the corner of his eyes, and the ghost stood out in his periphery. When he looked directly at Tommy, he saw a solid shadow, and then nothing but a disturbance in space where the air bent weirdly around the dark shape of a person.

It was his brother, though, and Wilbur was alone. So he sheathed his iron axe, stashed away the spruce wood he'd been collecting, and nodded at Tommy. An invitation.

Wilbur deflated onto the ground, leaning against the stump of a tree as Tommy walked closer. The leaves shuffled underneath his phantom feet.

"I don't understand," Wilbur said. He gestured in the direction of Snowchester's main area, where all the houses were located. "Could Tubbo not see you? Or hear you, or- or whatever else."

Tommy sat down tentatively next to him. His presence was cold, and Wilbur couldn't bear to look at him, so he turned his head away.

'*None of them can,*' Tommy said. It sounded like his voice was recorded into a disc — if that disc was as scratched and distorted as his prized copies of Cat and Mellohi were.

"What about Ghostbur, though, you remember him, right...?" Wilbur fixed his eyes on the horizon, on the sun that inched ever-so-slowly out of view. "He- he was more... more solid. Everyone could see him and everyone could talk to him, and he wasn't all—" he glanced at Tommy's fading form, "you know... *ghosty.*"

'Bit fucked up saying that to ghost-people, you know that?'

"...You're joking, right?"

The laugh that bubbled out of Tommy was light, airy, was loud and warm and felt like a starburst breaking through a glacier of a person. *'You're so dumb,'* Tommy snorted, *'We're dead, there's no being offended or whatever. I'm fucking with you, idiot, there's not much you can really do when you're a ghost.'*

"Why me, though?" Wilbur asked. "Why are you haunting me? I mean, we didn't have the best, uh—" he cut himself off, shaking his head. "Why not Tubbo? Why not Ranboo?"

'Because Ranboo is a prick and I hate him,' Tommy said without skipping a beat. He paused. Wilbur felt eyes at the back of his neck, and he pushed down the urge to shake his head to dispel the feeling. *'I don't know,'* Tommy admitted, *'I tried, but no one could see or hear me, and I couldn't move shit around them. You were the first person who reacted to literally anything I did, so, like, you know, I just- I thought...'*

"And your memories? Are you as... forgetful...?"

Tommy was silent for a long moment. *'I don't think it was the act of dying that made Ghostbur forget,'* he said softly. *'I think, I think as much as he wanted to remember, his, uh... his noggin... didn't.'*

Wilbur nodded and looked away. What did that say about him, then? "Right."

He couldn't forget being a ghost, was the thing. The memories kept trickling in day-by-day, kept flashing before his eyes when he least expected them to. He remembered how Tommy had been like around Ghostbur, how he'd treated the ghost with nothing short of carefulness.

But it hadn't been the kind of carefulness that felt undermining, dehumanising, or the kind of carefulness that screamed fear and wariness — it had felt kind, genuine, the kind of carefulness that Tommy only reserved for his pets and his friends and his family.

Family.

Wilbur's heart squeezed at the thought.

I failed you, he thought, *I failed everyone,* he wanted to say.

"Why are you here?" he asked, instead.

'What, like, here and now? With you?'

"I meant here, as in..." he trailed off, shrugging. "Here. *Here.* The realm of the living or, or however you want to call it. I know you've got an afterlife to go to — the, the void or whatever — I would know, I've *been* there."

'You're right, I do,' Tommy said softly.

Wilbur felt his heart skip a beat. He could tell what longing sounded like when he heard it.

'And I have been there, the afterlife,' Tommy sighed. *'It was beautiful.'*

Wilbur wanted to go back, too. Going back meant resting, meant getting to close his eyes and let the void cradle him and drift off into nonexistence. But going back meant dying, meant leaving everything behind again — Tubbo and Ranboo would never let him die, they needed someone to fill the void of Snowchester.

He wanted to go home, he decided. But home was neither here nor there, and he thought that maybe this was how it felt like to feel lost.

'But you're here now,' Tommy said. *'And it feels like I've got something I need to do. Unfinished business. Ghosts and shit, you know?'*

"I know," Wilbur replied.

He breathed, slowly, and ignored the way he couldn't hear a second person breathing in with him.

Tommy was silent for a long while. If Wilbur closed his eyes and ignored the chill set in his bones, he might start to think that Tommy had disappeared off into limbo anyway, left him like he'd once left everyone he loved.

But eventually, Tommy asked, *'Do you want me to go?'*

The answer was immediate, instinctive: "No," and Wilbur wanted to take it back, wanted to snap at Tommy and tell him he lied, wanted to stand and run and hope that the ghost wouldn't follow him then or ever again. He felt exposed, windswept, and it took every ounce of kindness left in him to leave the answer out in the open.

Instead, he waited. And the longer he waited, the less effort it took, until he was sure that it'd been the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth. It stung all the way down his throat, but he let himself linger on the uncertainty of being honest, and breathed deeply.

There was no point in lying to the dead. Wilbur knew this. Tommy knew this, too.

"I'll help you with your unfinished business," Wilbur said. He wanted to look at Tommy in the eyes again, the way he would insist on wearing obnoxiously red shirts and shitty khakis and boots — Timbs, specifically, because his hero Jschlatt liked to wear them — and the way he was all vibrancy and intensity and resonance, the way his voice would ring in your head like an annoying bell.

But he couldn't do any of that anymore, so he settled on looking at the shadow, at the glitch in the air where his eyes should be. He imagined his brother's eyes — striking cyan and mischievous glint — looking back at him.

"Whatever it is you need to do, I'll help you," he said. Then, "Please don't go anywhere."

Wilbur swallowed the pride that leapt up into his throat when he felt Tommy crack out into a smile. ‘*I won’t, big man. As long as you want me, I’ll be here,*’ Tommy replied. A pause. ‘*And, you know, as long as you don’t act like a complete dickhead. I get being frustrated but... I’m not the person you’re the angriest at, Wilbur.*’

And of course Tommy saw through him easily. He’d always been the person to see through Wilbur’s bullshit, had always been the person to see things how they were and not how Wilbur wanted them to be, which was *simple*.

(Because things were simpler if he was the villain, because he was no longer the paragon of perfection that he was supposed to be and maybe he never was and he was no longer a good person so maybe he’d always been the bad guy, because he didn’t want to care since caring hurt and claiming apathy didn’t change the fact that he was in constant pain, because he became the villain and things became simpler and he was good at it and it was the easiest thing he ever had to do and he felt like he could breathe, finally, could shed all the expectations of the general and the president and the hero burdened onto his shoulders and descend directly into Hades.)

His hand hovered over the button. Tommy had looked at him with faith in his eyes, had stuck by his side and trusted him not to press it.

When he eventually did, it had been the hardest decision of his life.)

What was simple was pretending he’d always been angry, always been filled with hatred and resentment and never allowed people into his circle of sincerity. What was simple was claiming that everything he did, he did for his own selfish gain, that everything he said had been a lie, that he only wanted to be praised and revered and would drop them at the second he realised he was not in the lead anymore.

But what was true — and Tommy knew this, which was why he refused to stop believing every bit of it; he needed Wilbur to know it too — was that Wilbur hated himself, first and foremost, and every drop of poison that spattered out of him was the byproduct of overflow.

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur tried, and everything in him burned to say it.

‘*I know, big guy,*’ Tommy said.

Something touched his shoulder, a hand, much too familiar but much too light and cold. Wilbur swallowed thickly and found himself leaning into the touch.

“*Schlatt is surprisingly unaware of the concerns and state of Manberg,*” Wilbur read. “*He is unaware, of how in reality...*”

He stuttered and fell silent. A cold chill ran down his spine.

“...He stands alone,” Fundy finished.

Wilbur closed the book with a decisive thud. Its cover stood out to him — ‘A Spy’s Diary’ in a fancy cursive writing he’d spent hours teaching a son — and more than anything, it made him sick down to his stomach.

He looked up at Fundy, at the smug expression on his face. He looked so much like his mother — clever eyes and clever head, the both of them knew exactly when and how to jump a dying ship. And Wilbur couldn’t blame Fundy either; this was a dog-eat-dog world — the strong thrive off the weak and he must’ve known that Wilbur’s old dream was never feasible in the first place, were the ramblings of a naïve though horrible person willing to manipulate his people into doing his bidding.

“This means that- that Schlatt has nobody,” Wilbur breathed. He tossed the book back to Fundy and backed away. “And- and everyone’s on our side now, so if we storm the country now, we... we would win, and easily too.”

“This also means that you don’t have to blow it all up,” Tommy said.

Wilbur looked at his brother, and began to smile. “No, no, Tommy-“ he clapped his hands together, “quite the opposite, look-! If I blow it up now, then the only person who would be hurt, would be Schlatt!”

Schlatt was as reprehensible a person as he was. Schlatt had killed Tubbo on that stage with no regard or remorse whatsoever. Schlatt had tried to kill Niki. Schlatt had torn down Quackity’s beloved White House and drove him away. Schlatt had betrayed the country he’d been sworn in to protect.

Schlatt deserved to die.

“Hey- no, no, no- Wil,” Tommy said, “you- that’s not fucking true, I’ve been in your stupid button room, I saw you- I saw your TNT-!”

Tommy was far too clever for his liking. He would never let Wilbur out of his sight, not when he’d seen the contents of his button room, all the explosives gathered in the corners and all the hatred festering inside.

But Tommy also couldn’t understand, and Wilbur had to go through with his plan no matter what, he was right and Tommy was betraying him, everything made perfect sense and Tommy was betraying him, Tommy had always seen sense in Wilbur and now he was betraying him, so why now, so why now-?

His heart clenched in his chest. Tommy was clever, too clever, so of course he would hurt Wilbur too.

He felt so, so alone.

“You were planning on destroying L’moberg...?” Fundy asked, voice timid.

Wilbur whirled back to face Fundy, cheeks hurting as he kept his smile up.

“Fundy-!” he started. “I despise you.”

Fundy’s eyes widened, ears falling flat against his head. His mouth hung half-opened.

“You were my son,” Wilbur continued, voice breaking on the last word, “and you betrayed me!” He choked out a laugh, weak and high in his throat, and he reached up to wipe the corner of his eyes. “I have nothing to say to you.”

Fundy’s expression shuttered into pain, but it disappeared as quickly as it came. He steeled his face into an easy smirk, defiance and annoyance and nonchalance, tilting his chin up to look at Wilbur down the length of his nose.

“You’re insane,” Fundy said in a half-growl. He looked just about ready to claw Wilbur’s face off. “You’ve gone absolutely insane. I have a madman for a father.”

(A father.)

Wilbur laughed. It was good to know for sure that Fundy wouldn’t miss him. He turned away and ignored the horrified look Tommy sent his way.

It was fine. A week from now, November sixteenth; it would all be over. They’d be free, finally, and so would he.

There was a stranger at the entrance to Snowchester, standing at the front gates and looking up at the wall.

There was a stranger, and the more Wilbur walked towards him, the more he recognised the man, all visions gathered from memories that weren’t really his, and it was weird to know that his ghostly counterpart would’ve greeted the man with excitement, but all he felt now was dread.

There was a stranger at the entrance to Snowchester, but first Wilbur was walking out the quarry carrying stacks of stone when he spotted Ranboo storming through the main area, breathing heavily with his fists clenched in his coat pockets. The kid didn’t get angry easily, but here he was positively filled to the brim with rage; he looked as ready to run something through with his sword as he was to break down into tears, and this was why Wilbur took his chances and stopped him.

“What’s going on?” he asked as he walked up to the hybrid.

Ranboo looked up from the ground. His expression un-soured as soon as he saw Wilbur there. “There’s-“ he gestures behind him, “there’s someone at the gate. Someone, he’s- it’s Sam. Sam’s at the gate.”

“Sam?” Wilbur furrowed his brows. “Sam... Awesamduke? Why would he be here?”

“I don’t know!” Ranboo threw up his arms. He directed his gaze towards Wilbur’s ear and inhaled deeply before continuing. “I don’t know why he would show up, and here out of all places too! I don’t know why he thought it’d be a good idea to show up here, at Snowchester, where he knows that, that me- me and Tubbo, we, we-!”

Without thinking too much about it, Wilbur placed a hand on Ranboo’s shoulder. Ranboo flinched, *violently*, and he pulled the hand back immediately.

But his fingers hovered over Ranboo’s shoulder for a second — in that second Ranboo didn’t move away, didn’t pull out his sword or push Wilbur away from himself, so he took that as permission to grip the kid by the shoulder and squeeze, as firm and gentle as he could.

“What did Sam do?” he asked, voice soft.

‘*Sam’s here?*’ asked Tommy’s voice, behind him, and Wilbur stamped down a flinch of his own.

“He- he, he’s the Warden,” Ranboo said. He gestured with his hands, flailed them wildly as he opened and closed his mouth, as if the words were there but he couldn’t grasp them.

“He’s the Warden,” Wilbur said. “Okay. And what else?”

Ranboo let his shoulders sag. “He let Tommy die,” he muttered. “He- they were both in the Prison, with Dream, and Sam let Tommy die in there.”

‘*That’s not true,*’ Tommy said.

Wilbur gave Ranboo one last squeeze and nodded at him. “I’ll deal with it,” he said. “You’re fine, Ranboo, I’ll deal with the Warden.”

Ranboo shot him a grateful look, ducked his head, and then Wilbur was striding away in the direction of Snowchester’s wall. A cold presence followed close behind him, like ice twisting around the shadows he left in his wake. He rubbed his hands together and blew into his palms in an attempt to stave off the cold, but it never worked — nothing he tried could warm the frost biting into his insides, nothing he found ever filled the void that had replaced the bright, blond warmth that used to reside in the space beneath his heart.

A ghost trailed behind him, frigid air and desaturated blurs. Tommy’s voice was almost a comfort.

Tubbo came into view next, standing by the lever to the closed front gate. He was hugging himself, face half-buried in his furred vest, but he looked up and nodded at Wilbur when he walked up to him.

“Big man,” Tubbo greeted. He looked like he was running on fumes and three hours of sleep. “How are you?”

“I’m good, Tubbo, what’s going on-?”

“Your checklist, Wilbur? Food and water and sleep and hygiene and all of that?”

"Yeah- I'm- all of them, yes," Wilbur said. "I'm good but- but what's happening out there, I ran across Ranboo and he said something about, uh, Sam being here...?"

Tubbo exhaled deeply. "I'm assuming that Ranboo's given you the scoop."

"The scoop," Wilbur repeated.

"The scoop," Tubbo confirmed, "the one that made him, y'know-“ he shook his head, “pissed off and all that.”

"No, right. Of course." Wilbur swallowed a block in his throat. "He doesn't want to talk to Sam, it looked like."

Tubbo bleated out a mirthless laugh. "No shit," he said, "I don't wanna talk to him either."

"You too?" Wilbur asked, a smile tugging the corner of his lips.

"Who does, really?"

"I don't know. I don't even know what he did," Wilbur said.

'He didn't do anything wrong,' Tommy insisted. *'It wasn't his fault, he did all he could. Wil, Wilbur, it wasn't his fault.'*

"Nothing good," Tubbo answered, face twisting into a grimace. "He's a little... work-obsessed, you know. He's the kind of person who puts work over... you know, family, friends, uh, *morals* — work over everything and all that."

Work over Tommy's life, too, Wilbur realised.

"I'll talk to him," he decided, after a short pause. He rubbed his forearms. His fingers felt like they were about to freeze over and fall off. "It might be important, something might've happened and we wouldn't know. When was the last time any of us left Snowchester?"

Tubbo had his lips pressed into a thin line. He didn't answer, didn't look particularly excited over the idea of Wilbur talking directly to the Warden.

"Tubbo, look at me."

Tubbo did. His eyes shone with moisture.

"Do you trust me?" Wilbur asked.

Tubbo's answer was immediate. "No."

Oh. There was an unwelcome warmth behind his eyes. He bit back both his lip and a blooming pain in his chest.

"Flip the lever when you're ready," Tubbo said. "I'll watch you guys from the watchtower."

He trotted away without saying another word. Wilbur sighed and reached up to rub at his chest, directly over the scar that's plagued him, and he leaned into the way that the pain took root and solidified into something darker, something that felt more like sorrow.

He was capable of sorrow, now, and he felt every bit of it like he never had before.

'Wait, Wil, Wilbur, please, Wil- it wasn't Sam's fault-!'

He pressed his lips into a thin line and straightened up, letting the back of his neck graze the fur of his coat. It was easy, slipping back into the face of duty like he was pulling up a drawbridge, and it had been one made to protect and to hide. He could herd all his hurts back behind the wall where no one on the other side could see.

This was easy. He'd done it before, and it had destroyed him, but it was the easiest thing he'd ever done.

Wilbur flipped the switch and inhaled deeply as the redstone circuit flashed to life, pistons worked and blocks slid over each other and the gate of Snowchester opened to reveal the Warden.

Sam looked terrible.

He had dark grey bags under his eyes, a sickly parlour to his naturally green skin, shaking hands around an enchanted trident, and unruly hair that stuck out at places — but he didn't look surprised at all to see Wilbur. He gave him a once over, but his eyes didn't widen and he didn't take a step back in shock or horror.

Instead, he nodded at Wilbur politely. "Wilbur Soot, I assume," he said. The uncertainty of his eyes, however, gave it all away. "I'm here to return Tommy's belongings."

His words felt practiced. Too expertly delivered by a man that looked anything but experienced. They betrayed his appearance and the fatigue in his eyes, and he wore all the best armour in the world but Wilbur could tell that he was an amateur at the kind of self-defence that really mattered.

"Am I talking to Awesamduke or am I talking to the Warden?" Wilbur asked, quirking a corner of his lips.

"What?" Sam said. He blinked, scrunched his eyebrows together. "I'm- I'm here to return Tommy's things," he repeated, slower. "He left only one thing behind in the Prison lockers."

"The Warden, then, I assume," Wilbur continued. He tilted his chin up, looking at Sam down the length of his nose. "Tell me, Warden, what took you so long?"

Wilbur shoved his hands into his pockets. Sam curled his tighter around the trident.

"I had Prison duties to attend to," Sam said- *recited*. "I couldn't leave until I finished following safety protocols and ensured that the Prisoner wouldn't- wouldn't do any more harm."

Wilbur raised an eyebrow at the Warden. There was a lie, there. Sam hadn't visited earlier for the same reason Wilbur couldn't leave — they were both scared of the same things.

"I'm only here for one reason," Sam said, after a pause. "I'm here to return Tommy's belongings to his... his next of kin."

His family. Wilbur felt his heart squeeze, but the pain had been kinder this time around.

"Why did Tommy die?" he blurted out. "You've got to, to know- I know that you were there to see it." His fingers slipped around the rope of his emotions' drawbridge, and he found himself swallowing a bitter taste on his tongue. "So how- how and why did he die, Warden?"

'Wilbur-' Tommy started.

"Dream killed him," Sam parroted. "He came into Pandora's Vault to visit Dream and he killed him in his cell." He looked back up at Wilbur impassively, like he'd delivered this same speech a thousand times over. As if he'd heard this same speech come out his own mouth a thousand times over. "I couldn't- I didn't get him out in time, I didn't get him out until it was too late and Tommy was dead. It was a lack of foresight on my part, but I couldn't make exemptions to the Prison protocols. I had to make sure that the Prisoner had no chance of escape, casualty or otherwise."

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. "But *why* did Tommy die?"

"Because Dream killed him in his cell when he came to visit-"

"I know. I *know*," Wilbur interrupted, "but *why* did Tommy die? Why did he visit the Prison in the first place? What business did he have, going there of all places?"

Sam didn't answer immediately, and the both of them stared at each other — heat to ice, unstoppable force and immovable object both at the ends of their capacity. Both as ready to keel over and die as they were to fight until they couldn't anymore.

It seemed to be a common philosophy in the server: to fight until you couldn't anymore. And for the most part, it was a noble sentiment, and Wilbur agreed wholeheartedly with it — he'd go down fighting far sooner than he'd throw down his weapons and admit that the fight wasn't worth fighting anymore. Tommy knew this, too, and he'd been a kid that believed in his ideals and in his people far deeper and fiercer than Wilbur ever could.

The problem was that wars took lives, took people, and there was merit in recognising a lost fight.

There was always merit in giving up.

Tubbo and Ranboo expanded the walls of Snowchester. L'manberg remained a smoking crater in the Earth. Wilbur hadn't stepped foot into the rest of the Dream SMP in months.

Tommy was dead. He would've went down fighting, too.

But he didn't.

"Tommy last came to visit Pandora's Vault with one goal in mind," Sam said. He paused, being the first to break his gaze. "He wanted to revive you."

Dread pooled deep in Wilbur's stomach. "Okay," he said. His voice was steady. "So Dream killed him because he wanted to revive me. And he revived me anyway because he wanted to rub salt in the wound. He wanted to spite Tommy even more, by hurting me like this." He inhaled deeply, wishing that his lungs could take in more air. "Or does he think that I would be grateful for a revival? Does he think that I'd break him out of the Prison or something? Because I won't. I fucking won't. I don't want to be here- I'm not grateful for *shit*—"

"No," Sam said, shaking his head. His hands were sheet white around the grip of his trident. "He's mourning too," he said, "he- he didn't want to kill Tommy either."

Wilbur couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out his throat, dark and coarse and wet, spilling out of him from the pot of boiling emotions that sat and shook deep in him.

"Of course he did, why wouldn't he want to kill Tommy?" he spat. "He's lying to you. He's Dream, he lies, he cheats, he's trying to garner sympathy from you, of course he'd tell you that he regretted it—"

"Tommy came in to revive you," Sam repeated, and he failed to conceal the wince twisting his features. "He was adamant that either he would get you back, or he wouldn't leave at all."

A cold chill ran down Wilbur's spine.

Sam continued, still wincing, "And Dream said- Dream said that everything came with a price. He didn't want to kill Tommy, but, but—"

"...But Tommy fought to die," Wilbur finished.

He blinked harshly. A sudden cold pressed against him.

"A life for a life," he whispered. "His life for mine."

'*It wasn't Sam's fault, Wilbur,*' Tommy's ghost said behind him, gentle in words and gentle in tone.

And Wilbur-

He could see it now, the scene in his head: Tommy alive, Tommy angry, Tommy confronting Dream in a cell. Tommy's face twisting and spittle flying out from his mouth and the way he'd push and bargain and threaten until his voice went harsh — and then the scene changed, and Wilbur saw Tommy dead on the floor with blood matting his hair. Tommy dead in Sam's arms as the Warden screamed at his Prisoner, Tommy dead in his best friend's hold and Tommy dead with his hair entangled in his brother's fingers, Tommy dead and six feet under dirt, under snow, buried in a little hill beside a tower and surrounded by the people who needed him the most.

Tommy dead and standing behind him, icy hands on Wilbur's shoulders to steady him as he shattered, as his legs gave way underneath him but he still stood strong though shaky, if for

Tommy and Tommy only; Tommy dead and Tommy kind, a fighter even beyond his very last breath — someone who fought to win, fought to die, and now fought to save.

“Take me instead,” Wilbur rasps out. He clutched at the lapels of his coat, thick and designed for warmth but failing miserably at its job. “A life for a life. Take me instead, bring him back. My life for his. Take me, Sam, bring me to Dream, let me die, please—“

“What- what, no, I can’t, I can’t do that—“

“-please, please, I can’t do this, Sam. I’m not strong enough, please, you need to bring him back- a life for a life, you said. Dream can revive him, and he needs a life- so take mine, put me back, I don’t want to be here, Sam, I want to go back—“

“I can’t put you back, Wilbur, you don’t understand- I can’t bring you back to Dream, I can’t get you back—“

“-you need to, you need to let me die, I don’t want to be here, Sam, I don’t. Let Tommy live again, bring him back, let Dream kill me and bring him back, Sam, you have to, you need to—“

“Wilbur, you have to stay alive, and he has to stay dead, I can’t do anything about it—“

“Sam, please,” Wilbur sobbed. “Let me die.”

He fell onto his knees, clawing at the front of Sam’s Netherite chestplate, looking for chinks in his armour and finding all of it cracked all the way through to the inside.

“Why not, Sam, why not?” he whispered into the armour. “Bring him back. Bring Tommy back. I don’t want to be here, I don’t want to be where he isn’t, please, Sam, *please*.¹”

“I can’t, Wilbur,” Sam said, voice as soft as he was. “I can’t. Dream was mourning too.”

And Wilbur understood.

Here was a truth: Wilbur never wanted to come back.

Here was another truth: Wilbur had no choice in the matter, at the end.

Here was the final truth, horrifying as it could be: Wilbur was alive, and his little brother wasn’t.

Tommy was dead, and he would never be anything but dead, because he traded his life for Wilbur to get his own back.

It was supposed to be the other way around; Wilbur was always supposed to be the one to sacrifice his life for Tommy’s — but in the end he didn’t, in the end he broke before he saved, and Tommy fought to die because he believed that Wilbur deserved another chance at life, because he believed that he was finished with his own.

But he wasn't finished. He wasn't done, and Wilbur realised this but the problem was that Tommy didn't. He had a future, he had a family, he had friends, he had things he wanted to do and people he wanted to talk to; Wilbur didn't anymore, but he was back anyway and Tommy wasn't, and now Wilbur didn't know what to do with the fact that these truths could mesh together into one horrible reality.

I want to go home, he thought, but home was neither here nor there, and really what he meant was that he wanted things to go back to the way they needed to be.

Tommy used to be home, and now all Wilbur had left was this stupid fucking server, this stupid fucking town, the two people that insisted he stick around them to fill the void of Snowchester.

Fact was that he stuck around because he didn't know what else to do, because Tubbo and Ranboo needed someone to mine their stone for the wall and chop their wood for the mansion and harvest their crops from the farm and teach them how to speak Piglin and they needed him to work for them and him to fill the empty spaces in their village and him to stick around and him and-

And oh.

Oh.

They didn't need him to work for them. They could do it all by themselves. They didn't need his services, they fended for themselves just fine without him.

They needed *him*.

Every day without fail, Ranboo showed up at his door and made him get out of the house to do something productive.

Every day without fail, Tubbo stumbled into him and asked him the same few questions — *Food? Water? Sleep? Hygiene?* — and berated him when he failed to answer all positives.

Every day without fail, Wilbur woke up to the sun shining in his eyes and a chill in his lungs and a pounding in his chest, but still he woke up, and some days he woke up and turned his head up to the sky to feel sunlight on his skin, and some days he woke up feeling like he's crawling with darkness but those kinds of days came fewer and farther in between, because everyday he woke up, and he woke up, and he woke up again, because he was alive.

He was alive, and his little brother was not.

Wilbur breathed.

He woke up today. He breathed.

Ranboo greeted him at his door. He breathed.

Tubbo came and made him restock his food stash. He breathed.

Tommy gave up his life so Wilbur could feel these things again, could feel and be felt, could need and be needed, could want and be wanted and wake up, again and again and again. He breathed.

Sam was speaking, was pressing something into his hands, and Wilbur looked up with tears streaming freely down his face. The drawbridge was destroyed, and a flood of emotion ravaged him until he was left standing in the wreckage of all the things he'd lost, hurt and broken but not alone.

"Tommy left this in Pandora's Vault," Sam said, "this was his most prized possession. He wore it everywhere until he came in to confront Dream."

Wilbur's hands curled around fabric. He held a long scarf, a striking, beautiful deep blue. Blue as lapis, blue as a missing Friend, blue as the sorrow that marred its fraying edges. It was heavy in his hands, threads billowing in the wind, clearly the work of an amateur but it was warm, warm, warm, when he pressed the fabric into his face.

Tommy's most prized possession.

(To love and be loved and feel the universe embrace him with everything it had.

He breathed.)

He was alive and all of a terrifying sudden, he realised he didn't want to stop being alive, didn't want to stop *being*. He wanted to wake up tomorrow, he wanted to feel the sun on his skin, he wanted to feel his darkness crawling over him and trudge all the way through to the other end, he wanted to *live*.

Wilbur stood, slowly, wrapping Tommy's scarf around his neck and letting its ends drape down his back.

Familiarity snaked its way around him. He was reminded, suddenly, that Tommy must've grieved for him too, and he hadn't done it alone. He passed everything he had to Wilbur, every bit of broken sentiment and attachment he had left, and all of it fell at Wilbur's feet, and all of it was up to Wilbur to pick up, and all of it was Wilbur's.

All of it for him to ruin, and all of it for him to love.

(The whole world used to be at his fingertips, ready for him to ruin and to love, and he'd destroyed everything he made because he was a horrible brother, a bad friend, the worst kind of person.

Now he had nothing, nothing but a blue scarf and two kids and a ghost at his footsteps. There was really only one thing left to do.)

"Thank you, Sam," he said quietly.

He met the Warden's eyes, and realised that he'd surrounded himself with mirrors of his own making; Sam's truth happened to be that he was grieving, too. All of them were.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur added. He paused to inhale. Tommy's scarf smelled like must, but he caught the faintest scent of grass, of rain, of gunpowder, and he knew exactly when Tommy must've knitted it. "I'm sorry, Sam."

'It wasn't his fault,' Tommy said, because he believed it.

"It wasn't your fault," Wilbur said, because he knew it.

Sam's face crumpled before him, and he looked like he was depending on the strength of his trident, dug harshly into the ground, to support him as his legs trembled.

"Okay," Sam said thinly.

"It wasn't your fault, Sam, I mean it," Wilbur said. "You did all you could."

"Okay," Sam repeated.

"You didn't do anything wrong. Tommy's death wasn't your fault."

Sam nodded. "Thank you."

"I don't blame you, Sam," Wilbur said. He paused. "Tommy wouldn't blame you either. Tubbo and Ranboo will come around. It wasn't your fault."

"Okay," Sam said, one final time. "It wasn't my fault," though he didn't look like he believed it all that much, "and I did all I could. What now?"

And Wilbur didn't know how to answer that. He wasn't sure of the answer, himself, because death was supposed to be the end. Death was the end for him, but there was an aftermath, there were people who grieved and people who were left behind, and now he was living Tommy's aftermath.

His pain was proof enough that he didn't have an answer. He had to give one, though, time and time again he was the person everyone came to for answers he couldn't give.

"Now we grieve," he muttered. "And now, now you go home, Sam. You find the people who still care about you, and you go back home to them."

'Are you home, Wilbur?' Tommy asked. Cold fingers brushed against the scarf. 'Have you finally found a home?'

I don't know, he thought.

He stayed quiet. Part of him was adamant in the thought that he didn't deserve one, but the rest of him was lonely, was tired, wanted to keep waking up in the morning.

Sam left Snowchester with conviction in his expression, in the line that he'd set his lips in. Wilbur stayed where he was, breathing and clutching Tommy's scarf in his hands. His brother stood behind him, dead and hopelessly so, but they were at least together in the name of

heartbreak. If Tommy had lived through Wilbur's death, then Wilbur had to be strong enough to live through Tommy's, as well.

When he finally turned around and reentered Snowchester, his eyes wandered up to the top of the watchtower. Tubbo was nowhere to be seen.

He felt warm, finally, for the first time in more than thirteen years.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: wilbur fights to keep what he has left.

ayup !! leave a kudos if u enjoyed :D have a good day dear readers o7

sonder

Chapter Summary

“Tell him, then,” Wilbur said. His own voice trembled. “If you could see him again, if- if he could hear you, now, what can you- what would you say?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Are you fucking implying that I’m scared of confronting him?”

‘It’s- you’re reading too much into what I’m saying,’ Tommy argued, *‘you’re twisting my words around and I don’t appreciate it.’*

Wilbur rolled his eyes, but the fact remained that he was awfully endeared. “I’m not reading too much into your words, idiot,” he said, “why would I even be scared- look, okay, fine, I’ll try and arrange a meeting with him, okay?”

‘*Wilbur.*’ Tommy’s voice softened.

“Prime even knows whether Tubbo and Ranboo will let me out of here, last I asked them about it they said they’d shoot me if I even tried to leave-“

‘*Wilbur!*’

Wilbur turned his head to look at the ghost. Tommy was the fading black outline of a person, hazy under direct sunlight and cold all around, hovering awkwardly at the end of the patch of crops.

“What?” Wilbur asked, but his eyes wandered past Tommy and he saw Ranboo a little further away, striding past the quarry and the farm towards Snowchester’s main area. His stomach did a little flip at the sight, though he couldn’t tell exactly why — perhaps it was the way Ranboo walked with intent and a blank face, or the way his eyes glinted an eerie purple, or the way his loyal particles were missing all of a sudden.

He had heard Tubbo and Ranboo talking about something like this in passing conversation, something about experiments and memories and sleepwalking, but he’d never seen it firsthand. He’d gathered enough, though, to tell that Ranboo was not himself, and the thought curdled in him like a sour taste at the back of his throat.

‘*Wilbur, something’s not right,*’ Tommy muttered.

His form flickered rapidly, blurring at the edges until he looked more and more like a stray shadow, and less like a ghost, let alone a person at all.

Wilbur felt a wave of terror wash over Tommy, and it hurt everything in him to not be able to pull him in close and reassure him it'll be fine.

(And even then towards the end of his life he had torn himself away from every fleeting touch, because his brother had reached out and tried to ground him and he had shied away, because his father had tried to embrace him in his dying moments but he had told Philza to fight instead, because he could no longer trust anyone's hold and it hurt everything in him not to trust at all.)

'Something's not right, Wil, you have to- you need to- something's not right-'

Ranboo walked up the stairs to his and Tubbo's house. Tommy faded out of sight with the whistle of a soft breeze. Everything in Wilbur screamed at him to *move*, and so he moved, scrambling to his feet to run like hell.

He skidded to a halt in front of the husbands' house, faltering as he looked up at the building. He'd never been or seen inside, and all he knew was that there was a child, one that spoke Piglin exclusively, and for this reason solely Tubbo and Ranboo kept it off limits for everyone but themselves.

Everyone, especially Wilbur.

For a second, he wondered whether investigating a hunch was worth the threat of death, but he remembered Tommy's panicked tone and he remembered Ranboo's face — and he remembered being young and finding a little hybrid kit stranded alone on his porch and he knew, he knew, it was never a question in the first place.

(For those that knew no better and did no worse, anything, and for as long as he was alive, everything.)

He steeled himself and opened the door.

There was a ladder on the opposite wall. A ladder, heading up to the attic where Wilbur knew Tubbo and Ranboo kept their child. He heard creaking upstairs, and wasted no time as he started climbing.

Wilbur had nothing on him. He had some blocks, and he had food on him, and he had the iron hoe that he'd been using to farm earlier. He had nothing on him, nothing but his life and his erratic heart, and this was the only drive he needed to follow Ranboo upstairs and swing open the trapdoor at the top of the ladder.

His suspicions were proven correct; Ranboo stood with his back turned to him, looming over a second person, a child, a Piglin though zombified, wearing denim overalls and looking curiously up at his parent. An axe formed in Ranboo's grip, Netherite and bursting with enchantments. Wilbur clambered onto his feet as Ranboo stepped closer towards the child, holding his axe with both his hands.

“Ranboo?” Wilbur spoke.

Ranboo turned his head to look at Wilbur, violet eyes narrowing as he assessed him. He opened his mouth to speak, but what came out was not Common, sounded like a deep glottal chirping that came all the way from the base of his throat, the sounds an Enderman would make when you listened closely.

And though Wilbur did not understand a word he said, he knew a threat when he heard one. He’d been living off threats ever since he woke up alive.

“Ranboo, I don’t know what you’re doing up here, or what you’re doing with your kid and your axe,” he said, holding his hands out in front of him, “but I don’t think you’re here to do any good.”

Ranboo swivelled around on his heels and responded with a different series of Enderman chirps, face scrunched up in frustration. As he spoke, he gestured at the child, and then at himself, and then pointed outside, westward at the rest of the Dream SMP.

Wilbur nodded anyway. He had no idea whether Ranboo even understood him. His eyes were fixed on the axe. “You’re not- you’re not yourself, Ranboo,” he tried, stepping closer. Ranboo stepped back. “You need to- you need to step away from the kid, man, please- please get away from your kid.”

A strange look appeared on Ranboo’s face. Where he’d been so carefully blank before, all murderous intent and steely faces, Wilbur saw the cracks begin to show, and he thought that maybe this wasn’t really an *other* at all, that maybe this was Ranboo but lost, confused, overtaken by a haze that he couldn’t get himself out of. Someone needed to stop him before he did something he regretted. Wilbur had to stop him before he hurt anyone he didn’t want to hurt.

Ranboo worked his jaw and spoke again, deeper and harsher, and his eyes flashed with decision. Resignation was an odd look on a person, Wilbur thought, Wilbur knew, but he didn’t think much else because Ranboo turned again and raised his axe and the child still wasn’t moving and-

(*Here was a funny thought.*

Wilbur wanted to blow up his nation in the midst of its very first festival. He wanted to end it all, kill his friends, let morals be damned straight to hell. But everything went wrong; Tubbo died, Technoblade went loose, Niki spoke up against Schlatt and had arrows pointed at her.

Wilbur had a goal. But that goal was dead at his feet because before he could think at all he was standing beside Niki and offering his life up in exchange for hers. Hours later he’ll laugh maniacally at two boys fighting in a pit but then and there, he was ready to die for his best friend.)

-Wilbur lunged.

He yelled a denial as he did, and slammed full-force directly into Ranboo. It sent the both of them staggering off-kilter, Ranboo yelling and Wilbur yelling and the two of them crashing onto the floor.

Wilbur groaned, trying to gather himself to fight because truth be fucking told, he wasn't ready to throw hands, he wasn't a fighter at all, he came in with no plan and no contingencies and it was stupid, it was stupid-

Ranboo kicked Wilbur onto his back. He coughed as all the air escaped his lungs, body convulsing with the force of every cough. He wasn't as tough as he used to be, either — revival had taken so much from him, bits of himself he'll never even hope to get back.

But the Netherite blade of Ranboo's axe hovered directly above his neck and Wilbur began to panic (*he didn't want to die he didn't want to die he didn't want to die*). Ranboo straddled his torso and snarled something in Ender, face twisted in fury. There were tears in his eyes, tears that sizzled him as they ran down his cheeks perfectly along his tear marks.

Whatever he was saying, it wasn't good, but Wilbur could tell that he was desperate, and more than anything else he was sure that Ranboo didn't want to kill anyone let alone his own child.

(Faith tasted bitter on his tongue and yet he swallowed anyway. He'd handed the aftermath of his death over to these people, now it was time for him to hand his life over to them too.)

"Ranboo, please don't- please don't do this," he wheezed, because gasping for air was useless, "you don't want to- you don't have to, please- please don't kill the kid, please- you can- you can just walk away from this, I promise, please don't- please don't kill me-"

He cut himself off. The plea felt like barbed wire on his tongue.

Ranboo yelled again, and he was full-on crying now. He shook his head, stumbling over his chirped words and gesturing with one free hand.

"Look at me," Wilbur whispered. Ranboo did. It was the first time they made direct eye contact, and of course it had to be a moment like this. "Ranboo, I promise- whatever you're feeling right- right now, it'll pass- you can pull through, it wasn't your fault."

Ranboo's face steeled over.

Wilbur felt faint. "It's okay, Ranboo," he decided, "you don't have to hurt anymore," and he could never understand what Ranboo was thinking or what he was or what was happening inside his head but Wilbur was sure, without the shadow of a doubt, that this, at least, was something he meant completely.

Ranboo raised the axe.

Wilbur closed his eyes.

The blade came down in a swift arc-

-he exhaled-

-and it dug itself into the wood floor with a violent crack.

Wilbur was breathing. His teeth were gritted together so hard that it hurt to unclench his jaw. He opened his eyes slowly, frozen all the way down to his toes, and found the axe stuck to the floor right beside his head.

He was alive.

He was alive, and it relieved him.

He was alive, he wanted to be alive, and if anything, this was only an affirmation of the fact.

Ranboo was hunched over, holding his head in his hands and clutching locks of his hair like they were lifelines. He breathed, shoulders rising and falling rapidly like he couldn't take in enough air. He was elsewhere, then, trapped in the midst of his own buzzing thoughts, and Wilbur felt his heart clench for the kid. He needed to do something, he needed to help.

Slowly, he reached up with both hands and gripped Ranboo's shoulders. Ranboo flinched but did not move away, and Wilbur had to take his little victories as they came.

"You're okay," he said, enunciating every syllable, "you're fine. You're safe, you need to breathe, okay, you need to- you have to follow me-"

He moved his hands down Ranboo's arm, and to his wrists, maintaining contact with every minute movement and making sure that Ranboo could tear away whenever he needed to. His own heart leapt into his throat. He hadn't done this, hadn't needed to, in over thirteen years.

"I'm going to hold your hands now, okay, and you can move away if you want me to stop," he continued.

He tugged Ranboo's hands gently away from his head, and Ranboo let him. His eyes were still shining a bright violet.

"I need you to look at your hands, okay?"

He worked his fingers under Ranboo's, pressing their palms flat together. One of Ranboo's palms were smooth and the other padded with scales. His fingers were longer, claws sharper, on his Enderman side, too.

Wilbur swallowed.

"Your name is Ranboo," he recited, "my name is Wilbur, and you have ten fingers." His throat fought to close up. "We are in the attic of your house in Snowchester, you are safe, and I am with you."

Ranboo blinked rapidly. The glow of his eyes dimmed, and his focus shifted from a faraway place in his head to their hands against each other.

"Again—" Wilbur exhaled shakily, "you need to count your fingers. Your name is Ranboo, my name is Wilbur, and you have ten fingers. We are in the attic of your house in Snowchester, you are safe, and I am with you."

He repeated the chant, over and over again, feeling his heart ache with every iteration of his words. Tommy was far better at calming people down, but he wasn't here anymore, and Wilbur had to make do. He missed his brother so, so much, and for all that he wished he could get Tommy back, he was the only thing Ranboo had at the moment — so he pressed on, poured his heart into it, beat down the urge to let his hands start shaking again.

He had to be strong, despite everything, and he was strong though terrified and this was what strength looked like to him — the ability to keep going.

Eventually, Ranboo began focusing, eyes flicking between all ten of his fingers as he counted, lips moving in a silent chant as he repeated the same numbers over and over. Ever so slowly, he shifted his fingers and intertwined them with Wilbur's.

Ranboo completed the gesture. Ranboo knew the proper response. He knew, and he must've learned it from Tubbo, and Wilbur suspected that Tubbo learned from Tommy, and his heart ached all over again — but he squeezed Ranboo's hands with all he had anyway, because he and Tommy only ever tried something like this to the people they really cared about, and surely this was what it felt like for his heart, bruised and aching, to expand and open and pound with a newly-realised sort of affection.

"...you are safe, and... and I am with you," he muttered.

It surprised him to realise how much he really meant his words. He was with Ranboo, holding his hands, and there was an axe by his head but he was still holding Ranboo's hands.

"I've got you, Ranboo," Wilbur said. "You're okay- you're okay."

"I'm forgetting things again," Ranboo spoke in Common, voice wet. He sniffled. His eyes were glassy, soft lavender bordering on green and red. "I don't want to forget. Whoever I am when I don't remember, that's not me. That's not who I am. But I don't want to remember, I hurt people when I remember- I hurt you, I almost hurt Michael, I can hurt Tubbo and- and-"

Wilbur held eye contact with him. "Whoever you are, whatever you remember... it doesn't matter, you're you."

And to his past, as musician, general, traitor, he was as Wilbur as he was now, and he would never let this fact be torn away from him ever again.

"You don't have to hurt anyone," he said gently. "You don't need to hurt if you don't want to, you- you're somewhere you can just exist, Ranboo, you're surrounded by people who expect nothing from you, you're okay."

"I hurt Tommy too," Ranboo said. "He's dead because I let him. He's dead because I took his friend from him and left him alone and he wanted someone else. He wanted you. He died for you. He's dead because he was lonely, and I let him."

"It wasn't your fault." Wilbur tried his best smile — gave Ranboo a weak, lopsided turn of his lips. "I don't blame you. Tommy wouldn't blame you. It wasn't your fault, Ranboo, you just wanted to be happy."

And Ranboo nodded slowly, eyes fluttering shut. When he opened them again, they were back to normal, and his breathing had slowed to a better pace.

He squirmed, and Wilbur took that as a cue to let go of both his hands, letting them drop lamely at his sides. He looked down at Wilbur, at the axe, around the room and at the Piglin child cowering in the corner. He blinked. Horror and understanding trickled slowly into his face.

"Wilbur," he said weakly, "please don't tell Tubbo," and then he collapsed.

Wilbur caught him by the armpits before he could hit the floor.

Ranboo was unconscious, out like a light, his chest rising and falling at a steady rhythm, eyelashes clumped together from the moisture of his tears.

He brushed Ranboo's hair out of his face and set him gently against the bed.

He sighed.

From the corner of the room, Wilbur heard a whine. He looked over at the child, at its hollow eye socket and its denim overalls and the wooden sword it held in its little rotting fingers, shaking as it pointed the blade at Wilbur.

"Hey there," Wilbur said, holding his hands out placatingly. "Michael. Hi, Michael."

Michael sniffed up at him and held the blade higher. It opened its mouth and out came a high-pitched snort, lips moving as he spoke in Piglin. "*Dad?*" it asked. "*Did you hurt my dad? Is my dad hurt?*"

Wilbur felt his heart clench. He was face-to-face with the reason why Tubbo and Ranboo wanted him nowhere near their house. "No," he responded in Piglin, in turn, "*your father's not hurt. He's safe, he's sleeping.*"

Michael lowered the sword and sniffled.

"*I wouldn't hurt your father,*" Wilbur added. "*He's safe.*"

"...*And my dad...?*"

Wilbur paused. "*I won't hurt your dad or your father. They're my friends.*" His throat closed up. "*They're family,*" he said, "*I won't hurt family.*"

Not anymore, he thought.

He felt an icy presence shiver to life behind him, the ghost of his brother hovering close by. Tommy was watching him. He didn't dare look behind him — the idea of seeing nothing

where something should be, feeling void where life used to stand, still scared him, after all this time. The ghost was walking proof of all the things he didn't want to admit to himself.

A memory interposed his train of thought — an image from a lifetime ago, an image of a father and a son and a home that stood worlds away from here. He hadn't seen Phil in so, so long, and the last time they met face-to-face he'd been begging to die.

It wasn't that he didn't understand Phil as a father — Phil only ever wanted the best for him — but he grew up in the confines of safety, and then years later raised a child in a dog-eat-dog world. He wondered whether that was why Fundy hated him. Maybe he only ever hurt his son — first by bringing him here, next by raising him, and finally by betraying him.

Never again, he realised.

He gave Michael a tired smile. This was a child raised in love. Wilbur would never dare take that away from it. “*You are family too,*” he said. “*I'll do anything to protect family. I promise.*”

Wilbur wasn't the best at keeping promises. This, however — he would try his damnedest for this — it was the least he could do.

Michael's sword disappeared into its inventory. It gave Wilbur one last cautious glance before trotting over to Ranboo and wrapping its arms tentatively around his torso.

“Dad,” Michael said, in Common.

It looked at Wilbur. Squinted its eyes. Sniffed.

“Uncle,” it decided.

Wilbur blinked, tears quickly forming in his own eyes. His smile widened. He reached out slowly and ruffled the tufts of pink hair growing on Michael's head, unable to contain all the fondness that had suddenly taken root and bloomed in his chest.

“*Take care of your dad while he's sleeping,*” he said, voice cracking as he spoke.

He stood up, wiping his nose, and gave Michael a little wave before climbing back down the ladder.

He couldn't believe it; his heart started soaring once he was out of the house, leaping up to his throat; he pulled his scarf up to his nose to hide the smile on his lips that refused to leave, ducking his head in the fur of his coat.

His ears felt hot.

‘*It really gets you, doesn't it?*’ said Tommy's voice, teasing. Wilbur refused to grace Tommy with the sight of his flustered state. ‘*Don't worry about it, big man, the kid called me uncle once too.*’

“And were you as embarrassing?” Wilbur asked. He felt weak in the legs.

‘Worse,’ Tommy said. ‘It was horrible. Its parents were there to tease me about it.’ Wilbur could hear the smile in Tommy’s words, as fond and endeared as Wilbur felt. ‘Kids, am I right?’

Wilbur shook his head and glared lightheartedly at Tommy’s approximate position. He didn’t respond, though, he was already pulling out his communicator from his coat pocket. He needed to see someone, immediately, he made up his mind the moment he followed Ranboo into his house.

(*For them, anything, and for as long as he was alive, everything.*

Wilbur didn’t know when this stopped being true, but it didn’t mean that he couldn’t fix it. He was the centre of everything that happened to him, a man made to hold a tight leash over his own life, and despite life and death and every little bit of loss he needed to stomach, he chose to give.)

He sent a message to Fundy.

Being a ghost was the easiest thing he’d ever done in his life.

Part of it came from the fact that he didn’t need to remember, and he was content not remembering, was happy to exist as nothing more than a hovering nuisance and a lighthearted presence.

Everyday he woke up, and he started to sing.

Sea shanties, folk songs, fleeting tunes — all of it, every bit of music his brain spat out, he’d try and translate into humming.

(Sometimes he’d sing the first notes of his national anthem, and he found that he couldn’t at all. Wilbur’s theme was lost to time, and it was better that way.)

It felt like it’d been a long while since he last found the chance to sing, and his voice was hoarse and he trailed off at the end of his sentences, unable to sustain a single note for longer than two or three seconds. Whenever the other citizens of L’manberg saw or heard him, though, they’d give him these weird pitying looks, like they couldn’t decide whether to feel endeared or disgusted.

Fundy in particular was tough. Fundy was repulsed by his very presence, but he never stuck around long enough to figure out why. Sometimes he’d ask, and Fundy would start talking but then he’d blink and his vision was washed through with blue dye and-

Being a ghost was the easiest thing he’d ever done in his life.

Memories fell through his head like sand through his fingers — not like he couldn't hold anything in his palms, he was as corporeal as any other living person, thank you very much. He wasn't quite as true a ghost as he would much rather prefer, but this was alright. He could still feel grass under his feet and wood under his fingers and the breeze in his hair, and nothing could hurt him anymore.

Everyday he woke up, and he tried to remember.

Wilbur was a bad man. No wonder his friends hated him, his son was repulsed by the sight of his face, his father didn't show an ounce of regret killing him, and his brother avoided him like the plague. But he — ghost-him, precisely, Ghostbur as he called himself, the name had a better ring to it anyway — was different, wasn't Wilbur, because Wilbur was a bad man and he wasn't bad at all.

Ghostbur could feel it, though, a tugging in his chest. There was a part of him — or rather, the other side of his coin, his mirror, the shadow to his light, his other half — that laid dormant and far away, sleeping and content as much as he was. Wilbur had wanted to die for a very, very long time, and this hateful part of him finally got what he wanted.

But not Ghostbur, though! Ghostbur was as happy as he could hope to be. Wilbur had wanted to do and be so, so many things, and now Ghostbur was left in his wake to finish all the things he never did. He was, in a sense, Wilbur's unfinished business manifested into everything he wanted to be.

Sometimes he'd ask Phil about Wilbur's death. Sometimes Phil would give him a sad smile and tell him he didn't need to hear it, and sometimes Phil would tell him everything except that the concept of everything was silly, this was the first time he asked about Wilbur, right, so why was Phil trying to shut the door in his face-?

Being a ghost was the easiest thing he'd ever done in his life.

It's the memories, he realised. He was missing parts of his life. And it wasn't like he didn't try to remember, it was that he couldn't, and more often than not he didn't want to at all. People referenced recent events he couldn't recall at all and Fundy turned his nose up at him and Phil's eyes were sad and Tommy, and Tommy...

Everyday he woke up, and he forgot.

He never pegged Tommy down as someone who made broad fashion strokes, but here he was, wrapped up in a white wooly scarf, looking at Ghostbur like he was a disappointment. It was far colder up in Logstedshire than it ever was in Pogtopia, in L'manberg, and Ghostbur couldn't really feel cold anymore but Tommy was dressed in a raggedy shirt and torn pants. A glowing compass on a string hung from his neck. Ghostbur didn't remember how they got here.

Tommy talked to him, though. He talked about everything and nothing at all, and the wonderful part about Tommy was that he didn't talk about the bad stuff. Or at least Ghostbur didn't remember him talking about the bad stuff. Still, he talked, and it was so much more than Ghostbur deserved.

But Tommy never once mentioned L'manberg, not a single time. He buried his compass under his scarf and told Ghostbur that he'd knitted it himself, that he had Wilbur teach him how to knit a long, long time ago — and there it was, an old memory, a happy one such that Ghostbur didn't forget; he remembered a night spent teaching Tommy how to knit, years ago and worlds away when they were just two boys sat far from war.

Tommy never asked him to remember, though, and Ghostbur was grateful. He slipped up and called him 'Wilbur' far too many times for comfort — the name he could bear, but not the despair.

Tommy was sad. This much was obvious. He looked out at sea and he looked up at towers and he looked deep into Logstedshire's Nether portal. Ghostbur didn't know how to fix it, so he did what he did best — which was try!

He always made sure that he had a constant stash of blue wool, blue dye, blue, blue, blue, to give to Tommy whenever they saw each other. The blue got everywhere — it stained Tommy's face, Tommy's hands, Tommy's clothes, Tommy's scarf, and Tommy would always smile, grateful, but he didn't believe and so the blue didn't work on him. The blue never worked on anyone who didn't believe as hard as Ghostbur did, and he wished he could say it, but it felt strange explaining the intricacies of dyed rocks to people who would rather run him through with a sword than listen to him.

So yes, Tommy was sad. He tried to hold a beach party, and of course Ghostbur was there to help. Dream was there, too — Dream was his friend, right, and friends gave each other a stack of invitations and told them to trudge their way through snow and-

Being a ghost was the easiest thing he'd ever done in his life.

Existing was the easier part. Void-him was missing out, though void-him was too asleep to care, and void-him wouldn't want to look back anyway.

Everyday he woke up, and he started to sing.

It was only after copious amounts of persuasion and many days of strictly good behaviour that he finally, finally convinced Tubbo to let him see Fundy.

It wasn't a matter of Tubbo disallowing him from seeing Fundy as much as it was a matter of distrust. Snowchester was locked from outsiders with no exceptions — Wilbur understood, Tubbo and Ranboo needed to protect far more than just themselves — and they didn't trust him not to slink off immediately once he was outside.

He couldn't slink off, anyway, he couldn't. He didn't want to, even. He didn't have the energy nor the resources to try and survive outside, and besides he was content living in Snowchester.

It was a matter of trust. He couldn't betray Tubbo's trust by sneaking off without his permission. Trust had gotten him this far, trust had destroyed him at his highest, and by Prime would he hang on to every bit of it he could regain.

And this world was built on reciprocity. Violence for violence. Kindness for kindness. Betrayal for betrayal. A life for a life.

Trust for trust.

Wilbur unwrapped the blue scarf from his neck and handed it to Tubbo — a form of insurance, a promise — and it was only then that Tubbo let him go. His neck felt naked, cold to the touch when he pressed a palm against his skin, and he wished more than anything that he could still have a familiar arm hook around his neck and a familiar boy lean his weight against him.

He wasn't allowed to want everything, though, and this was enough.

Fundy had agreed to meet him in the Community House, and so that was where he went, his feet taking him down a path he'd traversed a thousand times over. All the roads in the Dream SMP led to the Community House, the soul of the server itself where its beating heart lay crinkled beneath all the broken promises of camaraderie.

The war used to be a game, a long time ago, and the server used to be family — but then came Wilbur, Wilbur with his silver tongue and his golden ambitions, Wilbur who promised to protect them in one breath and betrayed them in the next; he had a penchant for ruining everything good that he touched, it seemed.

And Fundy was there, now, standing in the epicentre, twiddling his thumbs and kicking absently at the workbench floor.

He looked... good. Healthy. And older, too. 'Happy' was a stretch, but he held himself with confidence and his eyes were bright and sharp, his fur vibrant and his bushy tail fluffed up and swaying lazily behind him.

Staring at him, then, Wilbur became conscious of how he must've looked in comparison — with his too-pale skin and his too-thin hair and the heavy bags under his eyes that wouldn't go away no matter how much he rested. Living in Snowchester had gotten him accustomed to the cold, and even away from the snow he still wore heavy layers of clothing, but he couldn't manage to feel anything but cold. Tommy was still following him everywhere he went, and though he was silent more often than not, Wilbur could still feel him prickling at the edges of his perception.

Fundy looked up and met his eyes. His eyebrows raised before he schooled his expression into a neutral one.

"Wil," Fundy greeted, his tone curt.

"Hi, Fundy." Wilbur was suddenly, hopelessly, acutely aware of how much he wasn't ready, and yet he couldn't back out anymore. "It's been a while."

Fundy looked him up and down. “You’re back.”

“...I am.”

“You’re alive,” Fundy continued, as if Wilbur hadn’t said anything, “I mean, I heard rumours, but... but I didn’t expect any of them to be true.

“Rumours,” Wilbur echoed. He didn’t know what to do with his hands. He shoved them into the pockets of his coat. “From whom, exactly?”

“You know... like, some people saw you alive and walking around a couple months back. But, but no one was really sure, you know, what with Ghostbur and all, and the people who saw you... weren’t... exactly... people I talk to or, or trust all that much anyway.”

Fundy paused.

“Oh, and I talked to Sam the other day, and he mentioned you by name, so...” he added, waving a paw as if to dismiss it as an afterthought.

Fundy was playing it nonchalant, and when he did, Wilbur would respond in turn and pretend like he never cared, would convince himself he didn’t when the truth had carved itself viciously into his throat — but here, now, all bets were off as he stared at his ex-son and his ex-son stared back at him. It was a challenge, a game, a trick where they were both playful tricksters at heart.

But Wilbur was tired. He had cut down his mask somewhere between waking up alive and wanting to be alive, and sincerity felt raw and painful but he was no longer a stranger to hurt.

“I’m sorry, Fundy,” Wilbur started. “I really am. I should’ve, I should’ve reached out to you sooner.”

He held his heart high at his throat, bare at the surface of his skin for Fundy to grab and tear apart.

“Why didn’t you, then?” Fundy asked, contempt lacing his voice. “I mean, not like I *needed* you or anything, not like I fucking care, I just- why didn’t you at least- fucking, I don’t know, send me a message or something-?”

Wilbur opened his mouth. Closed it. The truth. The truth was-

The truth, he wasn’t even sure what the truth was.

“It was easier to just, stay in Snowchester and...” Wilbur trailed off. He swallowed. “Tubbo and Ranboo never really trusted me with any outside contact.”

“Good,” Fundy bit, “because the longer we talk the more I’m realising that I don’t trust you a single goddamn bit either.”

“I’m completely unarmed,” Wilbur tried.

Fundy rolled his eyes, folding his arms against his chest. His claws were out. Sharp, clean, poised to kill. "It's not the weapons and you know it," he said. "You've always- you've always been more dangerous with your lies, Wil, your *words*. You- that's all you do- you lie to people, you lie to me, and then you leave me- you leave us all behind." He scoffed, teeth bared. "I mean, whatever, you despise all of us anyway so what does it matter, right?"

Wilbur became very, very still.

An old memory resurfaced, a memory shrouded in narrow walls and echoing ravines and shadows strewn all around him, poison in his lungs and invisible bugs skittering along his skin. He remembered the words, exactly: *I despise you, you were my son and you betrayed me, I have nothing to say to you.*

Maybe he hadn't gotten better at all. It hurt him then to say it, and it hurt him now to remember it.

"What can I do, then?" he asked quietly.

Fundy glared. "You can be honest, for a change."

He was trying. By Prime, was Wilbur trying his best. It just so happened that his best wasn't enough, was never enough, would never be enough, and he had to grapple with the fact that he- he, too, was not-

"I don't despise you," he blurted, because it was true, and he was sure of it. "That- I don't despise you, Fundy, I didn't mean it when I said it."

"So why did you say it in the first place-?"

(And there weren't any words to describe how betrayal felt, how it was a knife dug into his back that he wrenched out of himself with the wound still fresh and bleeding and rotting, how he swung that knife all around him and nicked anyone who was unfortunate enough to come too close to him, how he kept going until he finally, finally bled out.

There weren't any words to describe his own special brand of self destruction, mutually-assured with every other traitorous parts of himself. Of first dying in a glorious inferno and then to a lonely suicide, of the shame that encroached him when his last thought so happened to be 'I hope Fundy doesn't see this'.)

"I was angry," Wilbur settled, "I- I felt alone, I didn't know who I could trust, I had my sights dead set on my goals and- and I couldn't let anything get in the way of that."

"You didn't listen to me at all," Fundy said. "I said I was a spy, I said I'd been working the whole time for you, I gave you my diary and all my secrets and you- you didn't listen to me." He let out a frustrated growl, throwing his hands out in front of him. "You never listened to me! Ever! In Pogtopia, in the Elections, and before that you never even gave me any position of responsibility or power, you never acknowledged my attempts at being my own man, nothing!"

"I wanted to protect you from the world, I built the walls for you," Wilbur said, desperate, but the walls were gone, his son was gone, his brother was gone, and he felt cold all the fucking time.

Fundy wanted honesty, and honesty he would give him, to the best of his abilities, because Wilbur didn't know what else to cling onto but honesty, but the single lifeline connecting his heart to Fundy's, to the fraying edges of the armour he'd so meticulously built over his trembling emotions.

"I didn't need your protection," Fundy snapped, slamming his palm flat against his chest, "I needed your guidance, I could make my own decisions, *dad*—"

(*Dad.*)

"-I was my own goddamn person! I trusted you to lead us, but you- you took away my own choices from me! I needed a parent and not a fucking, a fucking- someone who hovered constantly over me when it didn't matter, and was busy when it *did* matter!"

"I'm sorry," Wilbur breathed, "*I'm sorry*—"

Fundy took a threatening step forward. Wilbur stood his ground. "And then you betrayed all of us," Fundy seethed, "you destroyed my home, Wil, you- you destroyed the thing you built to protect me- to protect all of us! You didn't even bother to give me the presidency, you couldn't even spare the energy to *consider* me, you- you looked at me, and then you looked away, and then you-!"

Fundy growled low in his throat. He snapped at the air, shoulders tense and claws out and teeth bared in full display. If he mauled Wilbur right then and there, Wilbur wouldn't object. Fundy stood high on the list of people who deserved to have a go at him, who could rip into him and he wouldn't protest a single word, because he deserved it, he did, he did, he did.

He was a bad person. This fact crawled along his skin, invisible bugs skittering down his neck and arms and reminding him of the things that haunt him at night.

If Tommy was walking proof of his failures, then Fundy was clear, living proof of his malice.

"Why, Wil?" Fundy asked, jabbing a finger into his chest. His face was twisted into pure, righteous anger. "All of it. *Why*?"

The truth. Fundy was challenging him, challenging the challenger, and Wilbur took the battle on with shaking hands. The truth was-

"I was scared," he whispered.

The truth was that he was a coward, always will be. He wasn't Tommy-brave, or Philza-brave, or Niki-brave, he wasn't brave at all. The general's front was just that, a front, yet another mask he had piled onto his ever-growing collection, and all it really did was hide the pitiful, terrified creature underneath. No one needed to see the crying mess he was at night.

They needed a pillar, they needed the paragon of perfection, and he was wonderful at playing the part.

“I was so scared of everything,” he said, admitted. His heart raced in his ears. “I was lonely. Everyone had betrayed me at that point, the- the festival, when Schlatt announced the festival, you all looked so... so happy and I thought-“

He cut himself off, gestured with his hands weakly. Fundy held his gaze, eyes sharp and calculating and overflowing with emotion.

“And I learnt that we couldn’t keep L’manberg going without resorting to- to violence- to destruction. The nation that we built was gone, I needed to pull the plug myself, and I tried, I tried, but-“

“But you died. Phil killed you. You died- and, and we had to pick up the pieces after you were gone.”

Wilbur pressed his mouth into a thin line. “Phil didn’t kill me,” he said. “I asked to die.”

Fundy blinked up at him. “Wil-“ his voice broke, “*why?*”

“I wanted to,” he said softly, hands folding up to hug himself. “I was tired, Fundy, I hated what I was doing, I hated what I was- I hated- I... I didn’t like myself very much.”

He swallowed thickly, but he couldn’t stop talking even if he wanted to.

“And no one wanted me around, either, I was- I was so sure — first I was voted out of my country, and then everyone betrayed me, and then I realised I was the villain all along, of course I had to die, and then I destroyed L’manberg, I destroyed your home, I betrayed everyone- who wouldn’t want me dead, even Phil agreed, and I haven’t been around but I know I don’t have a grave, I know no one missed me and much preferred ghost-me and-“

“Wil,” Fundy interrupted, voice pained, face strained, “that’s not true.”

“I’m alive now, so,” he said, “I don’t- it’s all in the past, anyway, I don’t- I don’t care, I don’t mind much if you want me gone, it’s fine-!”

“I don’t want you dead,” Fundy cut in once more, far too quietly. Too easily for something that mattered, but maybe they deserved easy. “I’m angry at you, but I- I don’t want you dead, I don’t hate you. Of course I don’t- you’re my dad.”

And out of everything else, this was the one sentence that broke him the hardest.

“*Fundy,*” Wilbur whispered.

He could feel his face crumpling, heart dropping into his feet, a horrible chill spreading from his throat to his spine to his hands — fingers shaking like they’ve never shook before, like his grip on his arms, on the emotions shrieking at his walls, on everything, all of it slipping past him and his desperate scramble to piece together everything broken and laying scattered on the ground.

He could take loss. He'd taken it before — he'd lost his nation, his people, himself — and his brother's death was an adversity like none other, took far more out of him than he could really handle, but he wasn't alone in grief. Loss was just another lesson ordained by the universe, and he out of everyone had to be strong enough to take it.

But this was just a lie. Fundy was just lying to him. This was just cruel, no other way to put it.

"You don't have to lie to me, it's okay," he said, tried to smile and failed miserably. He took a step backward.

Fundy furrowed his eyebrows. "What-?"

"Really, it's fine, look- you're being adopted too, right? I remember- Eret's adopting you, and- that's really okay, I'm not mad or anything, really-"

"Wil, I don't understand-"

"Look, I hurt you, and you hate me, it's really fine, you don't need to explain or pretend anymore- I didn't ask to see you to reimpose myself into your life, I just thought that you needed to know I was alive, I'm not your father anymore-"

"Wil, stop," Fundy snapped, and Wilbur stopped.

He wanted to run. He needed to run. He was doing more harm than good, he needed to go back to Snowchester and never peep his face outside again, this was a bad idea from the get-go, he was making the same mistakes all over again, and he-

He wanted to try. He needed to try. He stayed where he stood and he was scared of Fundy, of how easily Fundy tore through his walls, but he stood still anyway.

"What- what are you saying?" Fundy asked incredulously. "You're my dad. Me being adopted doesn't, like, change that, I just needed a parent because you were dead! What the actual fuck are you talking about...?"

"I'm..." Wilbur started, "I mean, you... you said it yourself- you were born in the nation that I founded, and, and that's all there is to it."

Fundy's face fell. Wilbur felt his breath hitch. He couldn't lie to Fundy, but the truth hurt the both of them, and deep beneath everything, he just didn't know what to do, how to keep going, all when his strength kept slipping through his fingers like sand, all when every option seemed to fail him time and time again.

"I'm sorry," he said, because he didn't know what else to say and he'd wronged Fundy one too many times, "look, Fundy, I... I'm sorry, for- for everything."

He'd scattered the ashes of the bridges he'd burnt, mixed them with the ashes of everything he'd been and let the wind blow it all away. He wasn't as good as he used to be, didn't know how to be good anymore, and he wasn't powerful, wasn't respected, was nothing more than a man trying to pick up the pieces and run.

Fundy had no reason to talk to him and entertain his sorry self. Fundy wouldn't have gotten hurt anymore if he'd refused to see Wilbur and cut him out of his life without looking back. Fundy had moved on, gone six months without someone he never knew he didn't need at all, just like the rest of the world.

Fundy's expression softened, and he said, "That wasn't true at all."

Wilbur didn't know how to take it. He couldn't. "Fundy," he muttered, "you don't have to lie to make me feel better."

"I'm not lying," Fundy deadpanned, his eyes sparkling with challenge.

And it was a matter of trust. As much as he had raised Fundy and knew all his little tells, he still would never know for sure whether Fundy was lying. He doubted, and he wanted to shy away, but most importantly he remembered:

World built on reciprocity; violence for violence, kindness for kindness, a life for a life — and Wilbur trusted, before he expected anything back.

He needed to pick and choose his battles. He was tired of being hurt, was tired of hurting.

"Okay," he said.

He was tired of the darkness clouding his mind, too. He reached in, deep beneath the tender wound stretching like a ravine across his chest; he was a pitiful, terrified creature, screaming to appear more threatening than he really was, but he quieted, and he opened his gates, and he found forgiveness underneath all the shroud.

"I believe you," Wilbur said.

Unspoken, understood: *I forgive you.*

"I think I'm going to try and forgive you, too," Fundy said. His voice was low, quiet, head tilted down as he looked up at Wilbur. "Eventually," he added. "One day. I want you to be prepared, when I do."

Wilbur nodded. "I'll wait," he said, "I'll be there," and it was far more than he deserved, but he took what Fundy offered and held it close to his chest.

Fundy pressed his lips together in what would've looked like a smile if only the both of them were a little happier. His eyes were grateful.

"I'm proud of you," Wilbur said, because it was true. He put his hands on Fundy's shoulders. "No matter what. I'm- I'm happy for your adoption, I really am. Anything, everything, I'm happy for you. I'll always- I'll always be proud- " his voice broke, "of you. I'm sorry I never said it before, but I'm proud."

Fundy bristled where he stood, throwing his head to the side and huffing out a long breath. He flared his ears and rolled his shoulders, inhaling through gritted teeth. He refused to look at Wilbur.

He looked so much like his mother. Flaming hair, striking eyes, sharp features, quick wit, hard-to-get personality. The both of them knew when to jump a dying ship, but they realised the value in saving one, too.

(Fundy never much resembled Wilbur; in looks, in personality, in mannerisms. They were playful, and they were tricksters, and they were good at lying, but the similarities ended there.)

Maybe that was why he was capable of loving his son that much.)

“Right,” Fundy said, quietly.

“You wanted the truth. The truth is that I’m proud of you, Fundy.”

Fundy shook his head, but Wilbur could tell that he was flustered. “Wil, Wil, please—“

“What?” Wilbur said. “I take it that we’re father and son again, or- not ‘again’, I don’t know if we stopped being father and son, but- it’s true! I’m proud of you, and you’ve gone through so much!” He laughed, voice wet and broken, squeezing his son’s shoulders. “You’ve grown so much—“

“Wil, please, if you take my fox years into account we are technically the same age — what will you do when I eventually get older than you are-?”

“Like father like son, then! Prime, Fundy, you’re growing so quickly,” he said. “Far too quickly.” He faltered. “What am I going to do when I outlive you, Fundy?”

Fundy met his eyes tentatively. He knew. He had to have known.

A cold presence shifted behind Wilbur.

“I outlived you, once,” Fundy said, but he was no longer angry. Instead, his eyes spoke of an age-old wistfulness and a sheen of barely-there grief. “And I don’t even know how I did it. What was I supposed to do when I outlived you?”

And this wasn’t cut and dry as all of them wanted it to be. Death was a constant — loss was a constant, and the reality was that they were going to have to lose even more of what they already had, what they fought for, what they took back — Wilbur would never be ready for it when it came, but he survived once, twice, over and over again, and these losses felt like open wounds in his heart but he at least knew how to heal.

“I don’t know, Fundy,” he said. “I don’t think anyone can answer these kinds of questions.”

When he finally found it in himself to pull his son into a hug, Fundy embraced him back.

(‘I think I’m going to try and forgive you, too.’

Maybe that was the most Wilbur deserved — an eventuality that neither could cement in stone. Maybe it was another lie, something bred out of pity and fed to his starved self. Maybe

he was about to be betrayed, once more, and if he was then this was all for naught, and Tommy would've died for nothing.

Maybe Wilbur was looking too much into it. He had the facts — he was back, and his son with him; he had the reality — he was embracing his son; and he had hope — a future, surrounded by family.

Maybe it was Fundy's way of forgiving him.)

"The plan is simple."

Tommy cleared his throat and thumped a fist against his chest. His legs dangled three stories up in open air as he hugged the bars of the railings. He pointed at the entrance of the Prison.

"The plan," he repeated, deepening his voice for dramatics, "is simple. I go in, I convince Sam that this is a normal visit, and I get into Dream's cell."

Ghostbur stood behind him, playing with his thumbs nervously as he glanced at the distance from the watchtower's balcony to the ground. Tubbo and Ranboo had turned in for the night, both headed back to Snowchester to rest for the big day tomorrow, leaving Tommy and Ghostbur alone at the watchtower.

"And once I'm in, I'll threaten him. I'll threaten him with my overwhelming masculinity and my many, many knives," he said. "I'll make him revive you with the fuckin' revive book. If he refuses, he's dead. If he resists my charm, he's dead. He's either going to revive you, or I'll die trying."

Tommy turned his head to look at Ghostbur, a glint in his eyes.

"Was that cool enough?" he asked.

"Yes it was," Ghostbur responded, giving Tommy a thumbs-up. "That was really cool, Tommy. Tubbo's gonna be really impressed."

"Yeah," Tommy snickered, "and then he'll leave Ranboo's sorry ass. In favour of me. My incredible charm. My overwhelming masculinity."

"That."

"My many, many knives. And wives."

"And that, too."

They lapsed into silence, the joke falling flat between them. Ghostbur could feel the waves and waves of fear, uncertainty, coming out of Tommy, from the way his legs bounced to the

way his breaths came out shaky.

They were going into this plan completely blind. They had no idea what six months in the afterlife had done to Wilbur; they had no idea what the resurrection process looked like, they had no idea how far Dream was willing to hold the book over their heads. The only thing they knew, really, was that they needed Wilbur back, and that Ghostbur was willing to concede his life to its rightful owner — he'd seen enough out of Doomsday.

Every part of Wilbur Soot orbited around self-destruction. It was just a fact of life, a constant, unbroken.

"Tommy," Ghostbur said, quietly, "this plan of yours."

"It's incredibly simple, I know," Tommy said. "No. Yes, what's wrong with it?"

"Are you sure it's going to work?" Ghostbur asked.

Tommy sighed as his shoulders slumped against the railings. "I'll make it work," he said. "Whatever it takes, right? It'll work."

"You said... you said you might die trying..."

"I might."

"But I don't want you to die trying..."

Tommy looked at him again, met his eyes and searched his face. His expression flashed with pain. "Do you want to be revived?"

"I... I do," Ghostbur muttered.

"So I'll make Dream revive you. Simple," Tommy said.

"But what if you die...?"

"Then I die. I'll do it. You want to live, so I'll do whatever it takes to get you back to life."

"I want you to live, too," Ghostbur said. His hands clenched at his sides. His stomach felt like it was sinking to the bottom of his feet, leaving black dread in its tracks.

"Then I'll live, for you," Tommy said, voice gentle. "Whatever it takes, as long as you're alive."

There was conviction in his eyes, and Ghostbur had learned from experience that a convinced Tommy was a dangerous Tommy. The kid wouldn't give up no matter what. It was his biggest strength and his sweetest hubris.

"I want you to live, for yourself, for you," Ghostbur insisted.

*"Ghost- Ghostbur; I already do. You, uh, you taught me to, a long time ago." He shrugged.
"It's about time, I think, that I return the favour."*

"We don't even know whether Alivebur wants to come back."

Tommy grimaced. "He has to. I want him to live, too, you know."

"For you?" Ghostbur asked.

"For himself," Tommy muttered. "I think he's forgotten how to. I think, I think he needs a second chance."

"You've given him a second chance," Ghostbur pointed out.

"I'll do it again," Tommy said, lips breaking out into a hesitant smile. "Over and over again. He's not getting rid of me that easily, you know."

Every part of Wilbur Soot orbited around self-destruction, but every part of Wilbur Soot loved Tommy Innit, far more than he hated and he loved anything else.

For some reason, Ghostbur was sure, completely, that Wilbur would learn. For Tommy, for himself, for everyone he hurt and betrayed and still loved even beyond the grave. For some reason, he had faith, and faith was the only thing holding him back from protesting any further.

"I think he would really like Ranboo," Tommy said, randomly. "I think they'd really get along, like a house on fire."

"...But wasn't Alivebur the... the most politically-charged person...?"

Tommy was silent for a beat. "I think they'd get along as long as they kept politics out the dinner table. Tubbo would be really good to keep them from killing each other, I think," he said. "He misses Wilbur, even if he wouldn't admit it. He's mad, but... but he misses him. And I don't want to see Wilbur go all... all sad and shit. I think, I think the three of them could really help one another."

"Tommy..." Ghostbur said, nervously, "why are you talking like you know you're going to die...?"

"It's... it's just a possibility, big man." Tommy shook his head. His eyes were distant. "Just a possibility."

Ghostbur wasn't sure.

He let it go anyway.

(Perhaps that was his last mistake.)

The next morning, the four of them gathered at the base of the tower. Ghostbur felt a little out of place hovering between his friends, discordant feelings of unbelonging and desperate

longing beating together in him. It might very well be his last day spent as Ghostbur, and yet he felt only a tired sense of ‘it’s time to end it’.

“The plan is simple,” Tommy starts, fixing an axe behind his back.

Ranboo skittered in place, shooting glances between his friends. His gaze lingered for longer on Ghostbur.

Tubbo cut in before Tommy could start his spiel.

“Here’s the plan,” he said, pointing at Tommy. “You go in, revive Wilbur, get out. Ghostbur and Ranboo go and wait in the shrine-“ he jerked a thumb in the direction of L’malberg, “while I stay outside the Prison and wait for you. When you’re done, we’ll go and join them there, and we’ll see whether the revival worked.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “I had a whole speech planned, you shit.”

“I know you did,” Tubbo said, lips quirking up into a smirk. “Let’s just get this over with, guys.”

“Good luck,” Ghostbur breathed, “all of you,” his voice barely louder than a whisper, and yet his friends heard it loud as day.

“It’ll work, big man,” Tommy said, nodding up at him, “I’ll make it work. We talked about this.”

“Yeah.” A pause. Ghostbur felt like he couldn’t breathe — Tommy’s eyes were brimming with insistence, with sincerity, and most horrifyingly of all, resignation. He wondered what he was thinking, then. He opened his mouth, closed it, then said, “Be careful.”

“Always.” Tommy smiled at him, and turned to leave. “I’ll be back before you know it, alright? Wait for me.”

He waved, and then he was off, Tubbo by his side.

“Let’s go, Ghostbur,” Ranboo said, and they left for New L’malberg.

(Three things went wrong.

The first: Tommy went in determined to revive Wilbur, whatever it took.

The second: Tommy fought to die, screamed and threatened to throw himself into lava, whatever it took.

The third: Tommy succeeded. It took everything he had.

In his last moments of undeath, Ghostbur whipped out his communicator to send a message, typed out a message and lingered on it until he was sure he meant what he said. He wasn’t sure what he really wanted, but he was scared, and he was hopeful, and most of all he was worried. He needed Tommy to know.

Take your time, Tommy. I'll see you when I see you.

Dream revived him and Ghostbur shattered out of existence. Tommy never read the message.)

“Tubbo?”

Tubbo looked up at him, eyes glassy. He was sat on the ground, legs splayed out in front of him, hair disheveled and hands laying uselessly on the floor beside him.

“Tubbo,” Wilbur said, stepping into Tommy’s foyer and closing the door behind him. “Oh, Tubbo.”

He looked miserable. He blinked owlishly up at Wilbur as if they’d never met before, and his cheeks were damp with tears — but he wasn’t crying, wasn’t sniffing, was simply sat there like it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.

“Hey, big man,” Tubbo greeted, voice small. “How’re you?”

Wilbur stood over him, heart clenching in his chest. “I’m- I’m good,” he said. His eyebrows furrowed together. “Tubbo, what are you doing here?”

“Your checklist, Wilbur? Food, water, sleep, hygiene?”

“All of that, yes, I’m good. Tubbo, what-?”

“I don’t know?” Tubbo replied, though he sounded confused, unsure, as if he only realised where he was and what he was doing. “I don’t know,” he repeated, a little more certain, “I came here to, to- uh, to look for something.”

Wilbur crouched down in front of Tubbo, meeting him eye-to-eye. “Did you find it?” he asked softly.

“I don’t know.”

“What… what were you looking for?”

“…I don’t know.”

“Tubbo, there’s nothing here,” Wilbur said. A flash of ice struck his skin and he shivered — Tommy was here. Tommy was watching. Tommy was silent, had been silent for the past few weeks or so.

Wilbur wished he knew what he did wrong to drive Tommy away like that.

Tubbo stared blankly on ahead, completely unfazed by the sudden chill that had descended upon the room. “I know,” he said. He swallowed and sniffed harshly, raising a hand to wipe at his nose. “I’m lost.”

“You’re not lost,” Wilbur told him. “You’re at Tommy’s house. You know how to get back to Snowchester. You’re doing far better than I am.”

“Because that’s what I want you to think,” Tubbo said, matter-of-factly. “Good kid, even better spy, all that.”

(Good kid, better spy, perfect liar.

You couldn’t be a good liar without being good at detecting lies, too. You couldn’t deceive without being completely ready to be deceived. Liars spotted liars, and Wilbur used to have a far-too-keen eye for gold-gilded words, used to suspect even well-meaning truths of deeper, more malicious intent.

But then came honesty. He couldn’t lie now even if he wanted to.)

“Are you okay?” Wilbur asked. He wasn’t the best at dealing with these kinds of things. He hadn’t known how to deal with himself until quite recently; how was he supposed to help?

“I don’t know,” Tubbo said again. Wilbur couldn’t fault him. He would’ve answered the same way. “I’m lost. I want to go home.”

Wilbur nodded slowly. He was reminded suddenly, painfully, that Tubbo was a teenager. He’d been young when he volunteered for war. He was young, now, but thankfully he was still ageing, was still breathing and turning with the world. Some people didn’t have the same privileges — this was a fact they were both far too familiar with.

The scars on Tubbo’s face — raised burns and thick skin — spoke of his story.

The scars on his arms — fruits of his labour sowed and reaped — spoke of his fight.

The scars in his heart — carefully shielded over by the rest of him — spoke of him, Odysseus stretched far from home, fresh off the old war and collecting his pieces from the ends of the Earth.

“You can do that, you can go home,” Wilbur said. He studied Tubbo’s face, yielded no results when all he found was conflict. “You know the way back to Snowchester, you can go back, to- to Ranboo, to Michael, you can go home, Tubbo.”

“I want things to go back to the way they were,” Tubbo said, as if he hadn’t heard Wilbur at all. “I miss-“ he gestured vaguely around himself, “stuff. Old L’manberg. The, the old days, you know. You get me.”

Wilbur nodded again. He did. He always would. And because he did, he would forever feel a shade emptier than he used to — he was not as strong as he used to be and yet, and yet his old self never lost so devastatingly. Tubbo understood this. All of them did.

"I miss it too, big guy," Wilbur said, "but we have, we have the new stuff now, the newer days, you have a family, you have Snowchester, you have everything."

Tubbo was silent for a long moment. "Not everything," he said, voice weak. "Not him. It's not the same without him."

I want to go home, Wilbur heard, though left unspoken, and Wilbur agreed. He wanted to go back, too. He fought to go home, he bled to go home, he died to go home, and all of it was for naught — he kneeled before his mirror, someone who suffered as he did, someone as lost as he was.

They wanted to go home.

But home was-

Home-

Home was gone.

Home was neither here nor there — home wasn't L'manberg, built on hollow ground and memories of war and wooden stilts — home wasn't Pogtopia, riddled with the ghosts of better days — home wasn't the void, safe as it was, rest as he did, because the void was empty and the void was lonely and he rested for thirteen wonderful years but he was empty and lonely and really, what he really meant was:

I want him back.

"I wish he hadn't died," Tubbo spat. He raised his eyes, simmering heat behind them, and his face twisted with disdain, with vengeance. "I wish he was still here. He shouldn't have- he died for you- he shouldn't have died at all."

"He shouldn't have," Wilbur agreed quietly.

Tubbo shook his head. His voice was low, bitter. "I don't understand. Why did he want you back?" He ran a hand down his face, wiping at his eyes. He still wasn't crying. "He had- he had everything, you know. He was safe. He had friends. He was happy. But, but he-"

He made an aborted noise at the back of his throat, something that sounded stuck between a sob and a cough.

"-but he didn't have you," Tubbo finished. He looked up at Wilbur. "Why you?"

(Love is patient, love is kind. Love is irrational, love knows no bounds. Love doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints, it gives and it gives and it gives — and these were the kinds of things that he couldn't begin to forgive himself for; the tender facets of warmth that he'd forever prefer the cold to.)

"I don't know," Wilbur said honestly.

"His scarf. His stupid fucking scarf, you told me that Sam said 'next of kin', I don't- I don't get it-!"

"I'm... I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry."

"Why did he love you so much?" Tubbo bit out, rubbing a hand harshly against his eyes.

"I don't know," Wilbur said again. "I'm sorry, Tubbo."

I'm all you have left of him, left unspoken, words hanging stale in the cold air.

"I don't understand. Did he hate me? Did I not do enough, was I- was I not-"

"No," Wilbur interrupted firmly. He moved his hands slowly, reaching out to hold Tubbo by the shoulders. Tubbo let him, miraculously, without so much as a flinch. "Tubbo, look at me."

Tubbo did. There were tears in his eyes, but he blinked them away quickly.

"You were enough for him, okay?" Wilbur said. "You were far more than enough. You still are, always will be. He loves you, Tubbo."

Wilbur felt the cold presence hover closer towards him. Tommy stood directly behind him, watching the two most important people in his life fall apart right before his eyes. Wilbur couldn't turn to look, though, he needed Tubbo to know that his sentiments were infallible, that he spoke out of more than belief because he was sure, he could tell, he knew that he was right.

It was yet another constant in life: Tubbo loved Tommy, and Tommy loved Tubbo. Wilbur so happened to be thrust into the middle of it.

(It used to be that Wilbur loved Tommy, and Tommy loved Wilbur. Tubbo happened to be thrust into the middle of it.)

Wilbur didn't know when it changed, but he didn't dare to suggest otherwise. It didn't matter now, anyway. Take Tommy out, and Wilbur and Tubbo have nowhere to go but towards each other.)

"So why did he have to go...?" Tubbo whispered.

"Because, because he-"

"I know why he died, Wilbur, I know why he went to Pandora's Vault, I was there," Tubbo cut in. "Sam told me everything, when I had to- when I, when I carried the- the body out, when I brought the body all the way to- to L'manberg, to you."

A piece clicked into place in Wilbur's head.

"You kept me alive because you knew he died for me...?" he asked.

A lifetime away, it would've felt disheartening, and he would've been sent reeling from the reality that things didn't revolve around him, that the world didn't bend around his pride, that people didn't keep him alive for his own sake.

But now it didn't feel disheartening, it wasn't anything but a fact.

It just *was*.

"I kept you alive because I knew it was what he wanted for you," Tubbo corrected, and it was the same sentiment, same root, but it made all the difference in the world.

Wilbur was never one to believe that Tubbo kept him alive out of the goodness of his own heart in the first place — his kindness needed to root from a promise. Wilbur couldn't expect selflessness out of a person he had hurt so deeply, but kindness was kindness, his food came from Tubbo's farms, and part of why he lived was to prove to himself that he could make it up to the kid.

And here the rewards were: Wilbur woke up in the morning and smiled idly at the sea.

Tommy had his last wish come true.

"I'm tired," Tubbo said. "I don't want to hate you anymore. I don't want to hate you at all."

Wilbur squeezed his shoulders apprehensively.

"Okay," he replied.

He deserved- he deserved... so little. He deserved so much. He deserved more than he had and yet he deserved none of it.

He was a man who hurt people on his own whims but that pain came from himself, part of it was not his fault, and yet the choice, the act, was his and his alone. He was a man that destroyed everything he had, a man of bitterness and mistakes and everything come together to condemn, but he was still a man, surely, a man who now chose to try and be kind.

What did intent matter, anyway? He had a long way to go. He'd gone far, and the journey was nowhere near over.

He deserved everything and nothing that was coming to him. Surely there existed no judge, jury, or executioner who had the right to dictate what he should or should not deserve. He was a man, human at the end of it, and there was only healing left to go.

"This is what it's like to lose everything, I think," Tubbo said, voice starting to choke up. "I think you know. I think you've felt this before. I've felt this, too, and at one point you were the one to take it all away from me."

"I know." Wilbur winced. "I'm sorry."

Tubbo nodded, though he wasn't one for apologies. They were way past apologising. What they needed now was honesty.

“It hurts,” he said, as softly as he could.

“Of course it does.” Tubbo reached up and held Wilbur by the wrists, hands shaking, palms cold. “Good, that it hurts.”

He paused. His eyes were shining.

“Let’s hurt, together.”

And then *he* pulled *Wilbur* in.

Wilbur faltered.

(Take what you can get, take every victory you find, take everything that’s been given to you regardless of whether you deserve it, take it, take it all, it’s yours to keep and yours to ruin and what will you do with the things you received, what will you do, you’ve come so far and learnt so much and here your choices are, so make them.)

The decision came easily — he wrapped his arms around Tubbo’s torso and let the kid slot himself around the shape of his body. They couldn’t fit together at all, Tubbo was all too short and Wilbur was all too skinny and there was supposed to be an intermediate piece to their puzzle, but that piece was gone forever, and they would never fit together but they held on anyway.

Tubbo’s entire body shivered. He clutched at Wilbur’s back, almost desperately, and buried his face in the fur of Wilbur’s coat collar, a horn sticking awkwardly against Wilbur’s neck.

Tubbo was a teenager, he reminded himself, young and barely breaching eighteen and utterly drowning in all the things he lost, that the world demanded he lose. And he was young, sweet, still talked about beekeeping like it was his sole passion, but he built walls and threatened murder and sometimes he woke up screaming so loudly that Wilbur could hear it from the next house over.

This was Tubbo in his arms, whole and broken, and he held so tightly onto Wilbur with the knowledge that it was Wilbur, too, whole and broken.

Let’s hurt together, he’d said. Maybe it was an invitation, because time healed all wounds and left scars in its wake, and so maybe *let’s hurt together* was really a plea to *let’s heal together*.

“Tubbo,” he muttered, because he needed to ask, “do you trust me?”

The answer was immediate:

“No.”

Wilbur nodded against Tubbo’s shoulder, still hanging onto him.

He’d accepted it a long time ago, that this world was built on reciprocity but not obligation, that you could trust someone all you want but they might never trust you back; he knew this

lesson well and he'd been the teacher, once, had demanded trust and hoarded it all up only to cut all his ties in one devastating inferno.

"Of course I don't," Tubbo said.

Tubbo was nothing if not clever — he took to the world and surrounded himself with lessons in trust, lessons in lies, taking each betrayal in stride.

"Why would I?" he added.

And then he started crying.

Wilbur stilled.

(*Tubbo never cried.*)

He felt Tubbo's arms squeeze him tighter. He felt Tubbo shake horribly, tremors racking his whole body as he sobbed, as he shattered into pieces right in Wilbur's arms. He felt a light, deep within him, an old flame that flickered to life and burned holy up his throat — and this was it, the call of a brother, *protect, protect, protect*, anything and everything for the people he cared about, the people he needed and who needed him, family, if he dared to call them that.

He held on. He was the pillar that Tubbo needed to lean on, and he was bending, breaking, but Tubbo was the support that kept him upright and kept him going; they shared the same pain and lost the same person but they had each other, at least.

This was the missing piece he needed. He had his people, finally, his, his, his, and now he understood what he never did, back then.

(*"He's got me, I've got him," Tubbo had said, pertaining to Ranboo, pertaining to his husband, pertaining to yet another pillar in his network of foundations.*)

Wilbur had his people, and his people had him too.

"I'm here," he tried to say, as if it could convey every screaming thought in his head. "I'm with you, Tubbo."

Tubbo nodded into the crook of his neck. Wilbur could feel his coat and shirt beginning to wet with tears. But he didn't dare pull away — Tubbo was crying, sobbing, sniffing as tears and snot ran down his face.

"But Tommy isn't," Tubbo rasped, "he's dead, *he's dead*, what do we do, Wil, he's *gone-!*"

"I don't know," Wilbur attempted, but Tubbo didn't hear it, deep in his grief, gripping Wilbur so tightly that Wilbur felt a little breathless.

"I want him back," Tubbo continued, words interrupted by sobs, "I want- I- but, but I don't want you gone, it's, it's selfish, I want the both of you, I want to go back—" he was cut off by

a high keen, a wail, “I let him die, Wil, I- I gave him his plans, I let him go alone in there, I didn’t stop him, he shouldn’t have, I don’t-“

And as he said the words, Wilbur felt a shift in the room, as Tommy’s silent ghost stepped ever closer to them until he was a breath’s distance away from Wilbur’s back, Tubbo’s face.

Something leapt up in Wilbur’s throat; he knew, he knew in his heart, so he said:

“It wasn’t your fault.” And though his voice was weak, he forced himself to say it again, louder, more sure of himself, “it wasn’t your fault, Tubbo, you did all you could.”

“It’s not fair!” Tubbo screamed, voice cracking. “I tried, I tried- we, we should’ve- we never got to, I never told him, he’s, he’s-!”

“Tell him, then,” Wilbur said. His own voice trembled. “If you could see him again, if- if he could hear you, now, what can you- what would you say?”

“I love you,” Tubbo said immediately, “you’re my best friend, we- we had so much left, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have, I was supposed to- you, you were going to, to watch Michael grow up, Uncle Tommy, we didn’t-“

Tommy’s ghost bristled, reached out, and ice pressed against Wilbur’s nape, next to Tubbo’s wet cheek.

“It’s not fair,” Tubbo cried desperately, “we didn’t have enough time.”

Healing implied absolution. But there would always be the scars, the unfinished, and these are the things they would never mend — lost time, lost memories, lost people.

Wilbur knew a thing or two about unfinished symphonies, and his had been beautiful and rotten all the same, but this- this was a new kind of aftermath they weren’t ready to face. They’d rebuilt his country postmortem, but they couldn’t rebuild a person now, not under these circumstances, and it was a reality that Wilbur needed to learn to face.

‘*I’m sorry,*’ whispered Tommy, so softly that Wilbur almost couldn’t hear. ‘*I’m so sorry.*’

“He loves you, Tubbo,” Wilbur said, because it was a constant, because it was true, “you’re his best friend, too. He will always love you, you know that?”

Slowly, Tubbo nodded. His weeping had quieted down, but still he shook every once in a while from his sobs, and his grip on Wilbur had started to sag. He breathed, slowly, sounded a little like he was wheezing, sounded a little like it hurt, but he breathed, and Wilbur was breathing together with him.

Until the end of the line, Wilbur promised, and this was a path headed directly into the unknown, into the incomplete, into a future they might never find solace in — but he would stay until he couldn’t, walk the path until it ended, fight the good fight when it came.

Faces flashed in his mind; he thought of Ranboo, lost as he was, and he thought of Fundy, bitter, and he reached up to card a hand through Tubbo’s hair.

Family, Wilbur thought. *His* family.

(*His family, his, his, his — his alone, his to protect, his to love.*)

Part of him thought that he had found these people.

The rest of him — fruits of his labour reaped — felt like he'd finally reclaimed them.

(Later, Tubbo returned Tommy's scarf back to Wilbur, face still flushed and eyes still puffy, and he looked wistfully at the deep blue fabric but still parted with it. Wilbur wrapped it around himself and sighed as warmth settled around his neck, as he breathed in the scent of grass, rain, gunpowder, Tommy, Tommy, Tommy.

"Come with me," Tubbo asked of him, "come back to Snowchester. Let's go home, Wil."

Tubbo had released him of all his chains — he didn't need to come back, he didn't need to stick around, he was free, free, and yet, and yet-

He stayed.)

Chapter End Notes

next chapter: wilbur rebuilds.

tommy's theme

Chapter Summary

(“*Thanks for everything,*” Wilbur wanted to say, but Tommy already knew.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

And in the end, there were only Wilbur and Tommy.

Wilbur found himself walking towards the grave by a tower on a hill, mind silent as he let his feet and courage guide him.

Phil once joked that he thought too much for his own good, that he was the kind of person who was at his best when he wasn’t thinking, and at the time Wilbur took it as an offence but looking back now, Phil was right.

Phil was his father, Phil knew him best — better than he himself did, sometimes — and Phil knew what was best for him. But nowadays he felt like he wanted nothing more than to march directly up to his father and ask, with all the tired vitriol he could muster: *why did you help me kill myself?*

Did Phil think he was not worth saving? Did he perhaps harbour some resentment towards Wilbur? Did he believe that Wilbur would never recover, that blowing up L’manberg was proof in of itself that he would never be happy, that everyone did indeed want him dead-

Wilbur stopped by the grave.

It was the first time he had visited it. The grave was planted in a little clearing, the grass surrounding it cut short and clean, and there were drying alliums scattered at the base of the headstone. There was a bench facing the grave, a jukebox on one side and an assortment of discs — Tommy’s discs — tucked neatly into a chest on the other.

And the headstone itself:

Tommy Innit

Seventeen; friend, forever

Rest, you deserve it

Wilbur felt like he was going to faint. There was a reason he’d been avoiding Tommy’s grave for months; seeing it firsthand was concrete proof that Tommy was dead, his story forever

incomplete. Word of mouth was one thing and believing was another — by Prime did Wilbur not want to believe — but seeing it with his own two eyes, this close where he could reach forward and feel the smooth stone under his fingers too...

Prime. He missed Tommy so, so much.

He sat himself on the bench and stared on ahead, inspecting the grave, the clearing, the horizon, and came to no conclusion of his own. He didn't even know why he'd come here, but he knew that eventually, he needed to face the reality, one way or another.

So here he was, facing the reality. It was almost overwhelming.

A cold presence materialised beside him, and Wilbur was so used to the cold that he didn't react at all.

He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes until he no longer felt like he would collapse under the sheer weight of dread building on his shoulders. It was then, and only then, that he opened his eyes to a clearing, a grave, and open skies.

“Tommy?” Wilbur said first, voice quiet.

‘*Hey, Wil.*’ Tommy’s voice was distant, more akin to a foreign thought that had invaded Wilbur’s mind than a spoken sound.

“You’ve been... away,” Wilbur said.

He chanced a glance to the empty spot beside him and found... an empty spot — no smudge, no distortion in the air, no shadow at the corner of his eyes. He could barely even feel Tommy’s presence.

And indeed, it had been a while since he last talked to Tommy. Sometimes he even managed to convince himself that he’d been talking to a figment of his imagination, that a part of him was kind enough to grace him with the fading image of his late brother. But then again, he wasn’t capable of such forgiveness, it had to have come from somewhere; it was Tommy who first forgave Sam, after all.

‘*I wasn’t sure if you wanted me around.*’

Wilbur pressed his lips together. “Of course I do. What makes you think otherwise?”

‘*You seem... well, you seem to be doing alright,*’ Tommy said, a little hesitantly.

It felt as though he was shying away from Wilbur, a shadow retreating from light.

How times have changed. Tommy had always been the light, the bright, Icarus iridescent and blinding, while Wilbur had been the shadow over his shoulder, Daedalus releasing his son to the sky — and the world twisted, and the world bent, and Wilbur found wax and feathers along the shores and *wept*.

'You have people, now.' Wilbur pictured Tommy smiling sadly, eyes fixed on his own grave.
'And you're... you're getting better. I'm not sure you, uh, need me around anymore.'

"Need you?" Wilbur paused, swallowing. "Tommy-“ his breath hitched in his throat, “of course, of course I need you. I mean, that's us, you know, Wilbur and Tommy, Tommy and Wilbur, the- the crime duo, the crime boys, I don't- I don't know what I am *without* you."

Tommy laughed lightly. *'You know, I said the same thing to Tubbo, a couple months back. I asked him: what am I without you — and you know what he said?'*

"...What?"

'Yourself,' Tommy said, a little cheekily, *'simple as that.'*

"But you're dead," Wilbur said, "and you died because of, because- I... Tommy, I don't know how to live with that, I don't know if I *can* live with that..."

He sucked in a deep breath, felt a clog in his throat. He couldn't do this. He couldn't do any of this. And yet, and yet he felt Tommy's eyes on him, and when he blinked he saw Tommy's face, forever youthful, forever hopeful, and he saw the expectant look Tommy would have on his expression.

'It isn't your fault,' Tommy told him. *'I died for you, dumbass, not because of you.'*

"Doesn't feel like it," Wilbur muttered. He hugged himself and looked away, as if it mattered at all.

Tommy sighed softly. *'And it never will, maybe,'* he said. *'I know how these things feel, Wil, but I want you to know, in your heart, that this isn't your fault.'*

Wilbur wondered whether Tommy spoke out of wisdom or experience, whether there was a difference between the two of them anymore now that the world has bent so relentlessly.

'Maybe one day you'll believe it, yeah?'

And the finality of it all didn't sit well on Wilbur's tongue. He could see it clear as day — Tommy sitting cross-legged on the bench beside him, Tommy with an arm slung over the backrest, Tommy looking over with the softest expression on his face, something that hovered between fondness and resignation, the way his lips would quirk up into a half-grimace whenever he needed to say something that hurt him.

It, all of it... Tommy's words, Tommy's tone, it could only mean one thing, and Wilbur didn't like one bit of it.

"Why does this feel like a goodbye?" Wilbur asked, voice dry, eyes wet.

Tommy hummed to himself, a single note that wavered and faded with the whistling of the wind, the crashing waves down by the shore. For a moment Wilbur could hear something else humming with him — a woman's voice, perhaps, bordering at the edge of familiarity, a full note higher.

‘That’s because this is,’ Tommy said, after a while.

“Oh,” was all Wilbur could say.

‘I think we deserve a proper goodbye, for once,’ his brother continued. Wilbur could hear the wistfulness bleeding into his not-quite-audible voice. ‘I wasn’t there when you died, and you weren’t here when I did. And now, well... I wish it was under better circumstances, but...’

“Yeah,” Wilbur said. He felt weak in the chest, weak everywhere. “Your, your unfinished business,” he tried, “whatever happened to it? I never got around to helping you, so, what about it?”

‘My unfinished business,’ Tommy repeated. ‘It’s finished, now. And you did help me with it, you just didn’t know.’

Wilbur felt his chest constrict. “What... what was it...?”

‘Well, you know. Some people, some people are dumb, you know, some people love so much that they’re absolutely convinced that everything is up to them.’

Tommy shrugged lightheartedly.

‘Some people are convinced that this was their fault,’ he said. ‘And, you know, that’s blatantly stealing my credit.’

“Tommy,” Wilbur breathed. “Oh, *Tommy*. You... you fucker.”

‘That includes you, dipshit,’ Tommy said, and Wilbur felt a gentle shove of air against his shoulder. Wilbur wished he could push back.

They lapsed into silence.

Wilbur listened to the sounds of nature for a while. He supposed that goodbyes were inevitable, that he couldn’t forever convince himself that this state of half-death, half-undead would last indefinitely.

Goodbyes were one thing, because ‘goodbye’ was a word and mere words couldn’t hurt, *wouldn’t* hurt. But what it meant was another thing. It meant leaving, it meant losing, it meant a departure from ‘see you soon’s and ‘I’ll be back’s, and it meant that he was going to be alone.

“Tommy?” he asked, seized with the sudden fear that Tommy had left without him realising.

But Tommy’s reply came quick. ‘Yes?’

“I wish I’d been there for you,” Wilbur said, because he needed to say something lest he let the conversation die.

‘Well, you’re here now,’ Tommy said nonchalantly. ‘You’re here, and for me too. I think that counts.’

"*You're* not, though," Wilbur said.

He wished, he wished-

Well, Tubbo said it best.

"I wish we had more time," he said. "I think, I think we deserve far more than a few horrible years." The words spilled out of him, and he let them, pushed them out, because they were running out of time and not long ago he held a boy in his arms who had run so desperately out of time and he couldn't, he couldn't bear that same pain. "We had *so much* to do, Tommy, we were *so much*, and I want to be able show you all the things we could've been, everything we can still be. And... and I'm so, so sorry I couldn't give you more, I'm sorry I couldn't be the person you needed, the person you deserve, I'm sorry, I-"

Tommy needed to hear the truth, Tommy needed to hear his truth, and more than anything Wilbur needed to say them, needed to make them real and tangible and true.

"I want to *change* things," Wilbur said. "Tommy, I- I want to make things better, I want to *be* better, I want to fix things, rectify my mistakes, reconnect with the people that I pushed away, and I- I just... I just wish you can see it all."

'*It's okay.*' Tommy smiled softly. '*I'll be there.*'

"But you're leaving!" Wilbur cried, burying his face in his hands in one jerky move. "How can you, how will you, how am I going to...?"

'*We're brothers, Wilbur,*' Tommy said, his words as gentle as the touch of snow. '*You are a part of me, forever. Nothing can change that, you know?*'

Wilbur felt him move. Saw it in his mind's eye: Tommy twisting on the bench, leaning forward and closer towards Wilbur, reaching a hand out to him.

'*And I will always be with you-*' something brushed against Wilbur's chest, over his heart, '*in here. I'm only here to say goodbye.*'

Wilbur reached up and tried to press a palm over Tommy's. His hand met his chest. He could feel his heart beating, thrumming with life, warmth spilling out from underneath his thick clothes.

(*You. You. You are alive-*)

"That doesn't make any sense," he said, sniffling.

Tommy laughed. '*No, no it doesn't.*'

A long pause.

The sun tried to set. Wilbur wanted to stand up, scream at the horizon, let his voice tear through the air until the air tore through his throat — scream at the sun to stay up, stay up, he did not want to see the night sky for all its stars, because the night sky was dark and the night

sky was lonely and he did not want to meet the dark and the lonely and if he looked hard enough, if he strained hard enough-

“Tommy?” he said, desperate to fill the quiet.

He’d seen the other side, once. He’d been in the void only a few months ago, and it had tried to stretch him out to thirteen years and convince him to go back but it failed, it failed, he had frayed long and hard and had wanted to stay a sleeping speck of the universe, until he got dragged back to life by his brother’s sacrifice and had his will to live exhumed out of him.

‘Yes, Wil?’ Tommy responded.

He’d been alone only a few months ago. He couldn’t bear to think about it.

“Are you going to be alright without me?”

(The universe, infinite as it was, had closed his eyes as he died.

The universe, infinite as it used to be, had cradled him in its arms, a mother to a sleeping son, and he had been alone and he had been lonely but he had rejected any company it tried to offer him in favour of rot.

The universe, infinite as it could be, had opened his eyes and spoken to him, and Wilbur lived, breathed, wanted, grieved, heard the words where they descended as light calling for his brother’s departure.)

‘Yeah,’ Tommy replied.

Tommy was loved. Tommy would never be alone. Tommy was a child of creation, forever destined for failure, yet he was loved by his friends and the stars alike. Death had hooked itself around him but he wasn’t in any pain; it had managed to love him too, in the end.

‘Yeah, Wilbur, I’ll be alright,’ Tommy said, sighing. ‘I’ve got my cows with me; Harold, Harvey, Henry. I’ve... I’ve missed them, you know-‘ a note of endearment, ‘it’s good to have them back.’

Wilbur felt the heat in his chest intensify. He could almost believe that Tommy was tangible.

‘And I think, I think I see your mum, too, Wil.’ Wonder. Admiration. Wilbur wanted to cry. ‘She’s calling for me.’ Then quieter, more subdued, ‘I’ve never had a mother before.’

His mother. Wilbur hadn’t thought about her in forever. She and Tommy had been similar in so many ways — they loved as fiercely as they fought, and in the end they had fought for Wilbur — so if she was there, and if Tommy could see her, he was in good hands. If Wilbur could trust anything, anything at all, it would be his mother.

It was a promise, maybe, her last gift for him.

“That’s, that’s good,” Wilbur said. “...Say hi to her for me, won’t you? Tell her... tell her that I... I miss her.”

(‘Hello!’ said an arm of the universe, stars in her hair and stars in her eyes. ‘Hello,’ she called out to him, ‘I hear you,’ and waved excitedly to him, but Wilbur would never hear it.)

‘She knows, Wil.’ Tommy shifted his gaze up to look into Wilbur’s eyes intently. ‘You’ll be alright without me too, right?’

“I want to be,” Wilbur said, so easily that it surprised him.

He looked back at the space where Tommy’s eyes would be. He almost couldn’t recognise his own voice: weak, hollow where it poured out of him, intertwined with his own heavy, ragged breathing. If he looked into a mirror now, he wouldn’t recognise his own face either; breathlessly tired, far too old and far too young at the same time, shadows folded deep over the lines around his eyes and mouth.

“But Tommy, I don’t...” he said again, low and slow, “I don’t know if I’ll get better, if I *can*, you know?” His hand wavered over his heart, but he could feel the way Tommy kept holding onto him. His voice started to climb. “I can’t fix all of it. I know I can’t, I’ve made... far too many mistakes, pushed away too many people, destroyed too many things — my regrets, my mistakes, everything I lost, the things I never had...!”

Tommy shook his head.

‘Well,’ Tommy said, after a moment, ‘*they made way for the things you do have now, didn’t they?*’

Wilbur was quiet.

The warmth in his chest expanded further, crawling down his body until he felt fire on his fingertips; the kind of fire burning away in fireplaces, stoked by the hearth and not by gunpowder.

‘And the things that you can take back, too,’ Tommy added.

He could see it, a past, maybe; there he was, surrounded by the dark, embracing the dark, shirking the universe when it tried to reach for him. Ears covered, eyes closed, curling into himself as he wallowed in his self-contained, self-evoked hatred, so blind to love that he couldn’t hear the words, the humming, the song-

(*And the universe-*)

He could see it too, a future, maybe; there his brother was, surrounded by light, a creature of light and creation and the sun, the sky, the moon, all of it bending around him. Tommy with his golden hair and his cyan eyes and his wide smile and everything come together like a halo around his head. Tommy standing in a wheat field stretching forever, above him white skies and warm, sunny days, beneath him peace in death and peace of death — the afterlife that kindly made way for him. Tommy who touched Wilbur’s heart and opened his mouth, speaking, humming, singing:

(*And the universe said-*)

‘You are not alone, Wilbur,’ said Tommy, and Wilbur loved him so much that it hurt and it burst in him, through him, like ice and glass and the art of breaking, the art of remaking, shattered porcelain welded together by gold and hope. ‘You never will be again, not as long as you try.’

(‘I promise, I promise,’ his mother sang, and she loved him too, ‘for you, anything, everything.’)

These were the facts, cold and set in stone: Wilbur wasn’t there for Tommy, Wilbur betrayed Tommy when he needed him the most, Wilbur never wanted to come back to Tommy, Wilbur hurt Tommy and revelled in it.

And these were the truths, where the facts didn’t know to be kind: Wilbur loved Tommy, Tommy loved Wilbur, and they were saying goodbye.

‘You are surrounded by people who love you,’ Tommy said, and he was life at its brightest, death at its kindest. ‘And you love them, you do.’

Wilbur closed his eyes. Love at its purest. “I...”

‘C’mon,’ Tommy teased him. Brothers, family, peas of a pod and prodigal sons that hurt and hurt for each other. ‘You can say it. You do.’

“Yeah,” Wilbur admitted, *easily*, “I do.” And then, from the bottom of his heart, “I wouldn’t trade them for anything.”

‘You’re going to be alright without me, aren’t you?’

“I’ll try. I will be.”

‘Good.’ Tommy sighed. He leaned away. *‘Good. That’s all I wanted to hear.’*

Silence. Wilbur wasn’t ready at all.

It was selfish of him, but he never claimed to be anything but selfish, a little possessive, cupping in his hands the things that were given to him and keeping them close to his heart, snapping at anything that tried to take them away. He folded himself over them, back scarred and limbs shaking, but he held them to the best of his ability and when it came time to part with them, he couldn’t, he couldn’t, he wouldn’t.

Despite everything, Wilbur was young, and Wilbur would never be used to loss.

“Tommy?” he called weakly.

Tommy didn’t answer for a moment.

‘They’re waiting for me, Wil,’ he said, and he sounded even further away, like he was looking elsewhere.

"I'm going to miss you, you know that?" Wilbur blurted out. "We're brothers," he affirmed, pouring every ounce of sincerity he had into the sentiment, "you will always be a part of me, too, no matter what," because he needed Tommy to know, he needed Tommy to be sure, too, that he wanted to give back after everything that Tommy had done for him.

'I'm going to miss you too, big guy,' Tommy said, *'be kinder to yourself, okay?'*

('Be kind, be kind,' said his mother, 'because I know you, you are kind beneath everything, and you deserve so.')

Wilbur couldn't see his brother anymore, not with his eyes, not with his mind, but he stood out in Wilbur's memories like a beacon, like a calling, a path that pointed home.

"I... wait for me," Wilbur said, almost desperately, "I'll come find you someday. I'll get there, just, just wait for me."

He heard a laugh, a light trill at the edge of his perception, breaking through the humming that swirled all around them.

'Take your time, Wilbur. I'll see you when I see you.'

Then Tommy was gone.

The warmth disappeared from his whole body, and Wilbur was left alone, shivering, a hand over his chest shuddering in time with every heartbeat. He felt suddenly, horrifyingly scared to open his eyes, because he hadn't been alone but now he was, and he couldn't feel Tommy anymore, and he knew in his heart that if he dared to peek, he'd be greeted with-

Nothing.

"Tommy?"

Still nothing.

Wilbur opened his eyes.

He was alone, well and truly so.

He took his hand off his chest and ran it down his face. Tommy's grave stared back, unmoving, and the cold air resumed its course all around him. The sun had set completely. The stars looked down at him. He couldn't hear humming at all, and maybe he never did.

Tommy was gone. Wilbur knew it, and ready as he wasn't, he still needed to face it.

"Tommy?" he called out again, into the night sky.

(And the universe fell silent.)

He pulled his scarf over his nose and sat there for a moment, breathing slowly, deeply, letting tears form and fall from his eyes, until the wave of misery passed and all he was left with was

resignation. He stood up, rubbed at his eyes, and looked around.

It was dark, and mobs were bound to appear soon. The thought of a zombie trampling the dirt of Tommy's grave made him feel ill, so he took the time to light a few torches and place them around to illuminate the area.

Then he left.

Snowchester was far too lonely, especially at night.

Wilbur headed down the hill, towards the mansion, until he could hear Tubbo and Ranboo's voices intermingled with Michael's.

He didn't want to be alone anymore.

And in the beginning, there was only Wilbur.

He was alone — Phil had left him Southward to start the Antarctic Empire with their friend Technoblade, and although Wilbur was the admin of this server, he didn't have many friends, or at least many friends who would visit him. And 'alone' wasn't synonymous to 'lonely', but to Wilbur, they felt as similarly desolate.

So yes, he was alone and he was lonely, but he was an adult, he knew how to take care of himself and he knew how to take care of Newfoundland and he was fine, really. That didn't change the fact that he missed having company, though, because he missed Phil and he missed his friends and he missed having someone else to talk to that wasn't Pee Dog.

Then came Theseus.

Golden hair, cyan eyes, spitfire personality and timbs for shoes — the kid demanded attention everywhere he went, his charm rivalled only by Wilbur's own charisma. He was loud, he screamed a lot, and he had several bounties on his head but still he came to Newfoundland trying to scam the ever-living shit out of Wilbur.

Wilbur remembered Theseus vaguely, remembered finding a boisterous kid down in Hypixel and thinking that it'd be a fun idea to invite him to his SMP, that the server was open to anyone that caught his eye and caught his eye, Theseus did.

He was only fourteen, almost fifteen, and Wilbur could tell he had a long, wonderful life ahead of him.

After a day's work of diplomacy and bomb threats and avoiding the scamming attempts of one particular child, Wilbur started to ward away the other people gathered in his territory, and all but one of them left him alone for the night. It just so happened to be that particular kid, watching him with a curious look in his eyes.

He followed Wilbur around Newfoundland and helped him rekindle torches and fill up explosion holes with dirt. For the most part, they worked silently, and besides the occasional witty comment, Wilbur enjoyed the comfortable silence that had descended upon them.

This was a pleasant change of pace — Theseus had been yelling over people all day, and to see him quiet felt a little jarring, a little forbidden, but nice.

“Shouldn’t you be going back to Business Bay?” Wilbur asked, turning to Theseus once they were done and Newfoundland was all good.

“No,” Theseus deadpanned, “I leave when I want to leave, bitch.”

“That’s... that’s not really how this works,” Wilbur said. “I can kick you, y’know-“

Theseus froze. Right. Homeless kid, no server to return to.

“-from Newfoundland,” Wilbur amended quickly. “This is a threat. I’ll call in an airstrike. I’ll ring up the Antarctic Empire.”

Theseus rolled his eyes. “You’re acting as if I’m scared of you and your cronies.”

“...I’ll call Tubbo,” Wilbur said, dropping his voice.

He smirked as Theseus floundered, eyes going wide at the mention of his companion.

“No, okay,” Wilbur said. “Why’re you sticking around?”

“Nothing,” Theseus snapped. He opened his mouth, closed his mouth, looked around them, refused to meet Wilbur’s questioning gaze. “I... I saw you earlier,” he said eventually, “you were knitting something.”

“I was.”

“Yeah.”

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. “And what about it? I do it as a hobby, you know. I like doing things with my hands.”

“Nothing,” Theseus said again. “Nothing wrong with it. Boys can knit, too, all that, I’m not-I’m not a prick.”

They lapsed into another silence. Wilbur could feel the corner of his lip twitch upward as Theseus looked more and more uncomfortable, ears steadily turning redder by the second. He looked like a balloon ready to pop.

“Can you teach me,” he blurted out. “Sorry. Can you teach me how to knit, please?”

Wilbur laughed, shook his head. “Was that really so hard?”

“Yes,” Theseus deadpanned. “Teach me. Fuck you, bitch. I want to make clothes and shit.”

Wilbur's eyes flickered down to his outfit. A worn business suit and slacks that fit a little too big on Theseus' lanky form. Underneath that, his signature red and white shirt which Wilbur could swear he never saw Theseus without. All of him patched up shoddily and horribly unequipped for any weather colder than Newfoundland in the summer.

His heart squeezed in his chest. This was a child raised in independence. He never spoke about a family, about friends outside his fellow Business Bay members and Tubbo, never spoke about a home outside Hypixel and Hypixel couldn't be a home at all, especially for a young boy.

Wilbur remembered the way Theseus had looked, a flash of gratefulness across his face, when Wilbur extended the SMP invite to him.

"Theseus," Wilbur started.

"Don't," Theseus interrupted. He flinched away. "That's a- it's a stupid name."

"Okay."

"My birth giver and sperm donor gave me that name."

"Yeah, that's- that's how names work."

Theseus never spoke of family.

Wilbur made a decision, then.

"You can choose your own name, you know," Wilbur said. "I mean, you live for yourself, no one else. Your life, your identity, your choices. If you don't like being called Theseus, then don't."

"It's not that simple," Theseus muttered, "what about my friends?"

"If they're your friends, they won't mind."

"And everyone else?"

"Well..." Wilbur said, "do they matter?"

The kid pondered on Wilbur's words for a solid minute or two, eyes distant as he started to think. Wilbur could almost hear the creaking of the cogs turning in his little head.

"No," he decided, finally, "they don't. Okay. Right." He paused, smacked his lips, looked to the side. "Tommy."

"Pardon?"

"Tommy," the kid repeated, louder, more confidently. His ears were beet red. "Call me Tommy. Or Sir. Or big man. Or wife haver. Or alpha male, or-"

"Tommy," Wilbur tried out, and the name felt like coming home. He grinned devilishly. "Small man Tommy. Little man. Tiny little baby man. Fucking child."

And in retaliation, Thes- Tommy threw a punch at Wilbur's arm.

Wilbur scream-laughed as Tommy started to curse out his bloodline and condemn him to hell, wishing misfortune upon all of Wilbur's future offspring and a 'you will never feel the loving touch of a woman ever' as a cherry on top. They shoved at each other and threatened airstrikes on their countries, and Wilbur grew up an only child but this, but this-

"You suck," Tommy said, his golden hair all tousled up from their little play-fight, "you literally suck, you're old and fucking stinky and I hate you, I hate your guts-"

"You're a fucking child!" Wilbur laughed. "You're small and short and also wrong, and are bad, and I could- " he was cut off by a jab on the side from Tommy, "ow, do you want me to throw you off an actual cliff?"

"Your country doesn't even have cliffs! You suck, your land sucks, I'll get Tubbo to nuke this whole place to the ground-"

"Yeah, and, and I'll get the Antarcticans to invade and assimilate Business Bay next-"

"You're targeting me, you're harassing me, this is targeted harassment!" Tommy exclaimed indignantly, pressing a hand flat on his puffed-out chest. "Towards me, no less! Sir Tommy Innit of Business Bay!"

"Tommy... Innit," Wilbur said. He raised an eyebrow. "Innit."

"Yeah?" Tommy challenged. "And what about it?"

"Nothing," Wilbur said as he shook his head, "just an odd surname, is all."

"Your surname is odd," Tommy rebutted. "What kind of motherfucker names their child 'Wilbur Soot'? What kinda prick-?"

"Me." Wilbur smiled toothily. "I named me."

"More like Wilbur Shit," Tommy scoffed as he rolled his eyes. He paused for a few moments — a few moments in which Wilbur could barely contain a fond retort of his own — before continuing, voice softer than before. "Who were you, before?"

Wilbur hummed to himself. He couldn't remember much of his past, if he was being honest with himself — it'd always been him and Phil and his mother, and then he remembered the Sky Gods, and then nothing. Before he knew it, years had passed and his name was Wilbur Soot and he was reunited with Phil but not his mother. Still, he didn't like to dwell on it, couldn't, really, lost time was lost time and there was no use trying to remember.

"Does it matter?" he asked, shrugging. "I mean, the past is in the past, bygones and all that, right? Keep what you can keep, let everything else go, right? If you think a little long and hard about it, there isn't really any use in being sentimental, being... being attached."

Tommy squinted at him. “Sentimentality,” he said firmly, “is not a weakness.” He crossed his arms, mouth twisting into a scowl. “Being attached to things, places, memories, it’s not something to be... ashamed of. If you’re so quick to give up on something, how will you fight for it?”

“Of course,” Wilbur said, nodding, “but eventually, you’re going to wear yourself out trying to keep every single thing you love. You’ve got to cut your losses at some point.”

Tommy nodded hesitantly.

“I mean, you’re right, for the record. You’re absolutely correct, I think there’s merit in both giving up and... persevering,” Wilbur continued. “Your past can hurt you, but it can also make you strong, and all that. I think, I think everyone just needs to find a good balance between the two.”

“Right,” Tommy said quietly.

His eyes were elsewhere, gazing wistfully at the horizon, at the gentle waves of the oceans around Newfoundland. They flashed silver in the moonlight and flickered amber in the torchlight, though they were really blue, cyan, bright as a clear sky in a perfect midday.

“So who are you, now?” Tommy continued. “And what do you want to be?”

Wilbur pondered on the answer for a long while. And in that long while, Tommy casted his face down, trying to hide his own turmoil from Wilbur’s keen eyes.

The kid wasn’t any good at hiding. Wilbur could read him like a book, fold the pages he deemed important, write a summary if he so wished to — the scariest part so happened to be that Tommy let him.

He was brave, Wilbur had to give him that, and he trusted far too much for his own good.

It might get him killed, one day.

“Happy,” Wilbur decided. He smiled softly. “That’s what I want to be.”

There was a house by the Prison, a house made of wood walls and a stone roof, surrounded by white flowers and red vines, and the server called it Pandora’s Reprieve.

Sometimes while he was out on his errands, Wilbur would see the silhouettes of two people moving around in the house. Sometimes there would be a white dog, yellow collar, sleeping on the porch basked in golden sunlight. Sometimes the vines around the house would grow a little closer, brush the walls of the house with their tendrils, and then Ponk would come storming outside, red-eyed and pale, and talk to the vines until they receded.

Sometimes Wilbur would meet Sam on his way to work in the Prison, and Sam looked healthy despite all the vines around his house, despite everything, and he had bags under his eyes but all of them did.

He looked happy.

“*Go home, Sam,*” Wilbur had said, the first time they properly met, “*find the people who care about you and go back home to them.*”

It looked like Sam had taken his advice to heart. He had the privilege of being loved, he had the rewards of loving, and it was now just a matter of keeping it with all he had.

And this was what changed:

Sam went to work at the brink of dawn and came out after only two hours. If anyone asked to visit, then he’d be there to guide them through the process, but otherwise he wouldn’t return to the Prison until the brink of night to lock it down until the next day. He filled up the majority of his days building, mining, studying redstone, tending to the flowers around his house. Usually, he’d have Ponk by his side, and when Ponk wasn’t around, he’d have his dog accompany him.

“I think I just needed some space,” Sam told him, when they met on the Prime Path. His smile was tired, mirrored on Wilbur’s face. “I moved out of Pandora’s Vault, took all my items with me. I think I just needed to be away from it, I mean, it’s still... work, but... I think that’s what I needed to do.”

“And what if Dream escapes?” Wilbur asked, as kindly as he could. It wasn’t a challenge.

Sam was silent for a moment, lips pressed together. “He dies,” he said lightly. “I think I’m done making excuses for him, too.”

Wilbur wouldn’t know what that meant, but he sensed that it had to be important to Sam — to Atlas, laying his world down to live. He bid his farewell, afterward, and noticed a red vine shying away from Sam as he strode past it.

There was a house by the hill overlooking L’manberg, a house and a bench and a farm tucked into the hillside, a house with dirt walls and a dirt roof and empty chests inside.

This house had been left unattended for so long that grass had begun to grow on the roof, down the walls. This house would never be occupied, not until the inhabitants of the SMP were all dead and their descendants were free to roam and own the server.

This house was Tommy’s, once, and now it didn’t belong to him but will forever be his, both at the same time. The jukebox by his bench was broken.

Wilbur visited Tommy's house every other day. He cleaned the dust gathering inside, planted seeds in the farmland, cleared dirt from the branch of the Prime Path cutting through the property, rekindled the burnt out torches around the area, reminisced as he worked and kept Tommy's memory safe. Sometimes Tubbo came with him, sometimes Ranboo came with him, sometimes both came and worked silently with him and sometimes neither did and he basked in the silence all on his own.

And when he was done with Tommy's house, he would part ways with whoever accompanied him and follow the Prime Path further until he reached L'manberg's crater. He ducked under the glass to try and clean up the debris before tears welled up in his eyes and he left before anyone could see him cry.

Sometimes he found Fundy in L'manberg looking at the crater in dismay, and then they'd walk and talk their way down memory lane, before leaving to tend to their other errands with heavier hearts and lighter shoulders.

(Once, he walked aimlessly down the Prime Path and decided to enter Eret's museum.

He stood in the replica of his caravan with his hands in his pockets, chin tucked into Tommy's scarf, noting smooth edges where chips were supposed to be, empty chests where he used to fill them with junk, a pressure plated door instead of an inconvenient button. The air was stagnant, uncomfortable, and it would never be anything but.

He felt his muscles seize up as he moved on and entered the Final Control Room. Unlike the caravan, this room had many, many intentional imperfections. He wondered how long Eret had spent building it. Nothing happened when he pressed the button, nothing but a flash of blood in his mind and the distant memory of screaming in his ears.

He opened the chest labelled with his name. There was a book inside.

In a rather familiar cursive handwriting:

T'm sorry.

-Eret'

He took the book, entered the replica of his button room, wrote 'Me too.' below Eret's note, and left the book unsigned by the button.

The next time he met Eret, he was the first, but not the only one, to say, "I forgive you.")

And on his return trip to Snowchester, he would stop by Tommy's house again to lock the doors, water the crops, close the fence gates. Flowers dotted the ground, nowadays; alliums from Ranboo, daffodils from Tubbo, and an assortment of many others that hadn't been planted by any of them.

Wilbur planted cornflowers by the entrance of Tommy's house, and he watered every flower he saw. He took a moment to enjoy the scenery, the colours, before he left the property and returned home to Snowchester.

But he would always, always come back. Someone needed to tend to the place, after all.

There was a house in Snowchester, and Wilbur gladly called it home.

It used to be a guest house, but over the course of a couple months, he'd filled it with clothes in the cupboards and messy junk in the chests. His workbench was worn, such that his tools sometimes came out shoddy, and he had a row of furnaces that he stocked with coal regularly and smokers that he often forgot to. The house used to be empty, but now it was lived in and homely and warm — he'd lived in it, breathed life into it, plastered his personality into its walls and stained its floor with his footsteps.

One day he made a guitar stand out of iron and wood and placed it beside his bed in the attic. He couldn't bring himself to make a guitar, though, and the next morning he couldn't bear the anxiety of asking Tubbo the whereabouts of his old one, so this would have to be shelved as yet another item on his list of 'one day's.

Some nights he got woken up by sounds next door, thumping and screaming and arguing. Some nights he got woken up by his own nightmares, visions of wooden buttons and blackstone walls and flaming arrows. Some nights he couldn't sleep at all, haunted by his own mind as he curled up in bed and tried to breathe through the emptiness encroaching his space.

But in the morning, he woke up. He always felt tired as he got out of bed, always felt like he couldn't move, couldn't live, couldn't function without wanting to return to the dark void of sleep and death, but he woke up anyway and cooked himself a meal and showered and greeted Ranboo at the door before going to work.

He gladly called Snowchester 'home', which was why, when it came time to defend it, he did so without hesitation.

They called themselves the Syndicate.

They weren't part of Wilbur's back-to-life crash course, because Wilbur walked out of his house one morning to find three very particular people he hadn't expected to see that day, or perhaps ever. He wasn't the bravest person around, especially when it came to the bridges he built, burnt, and buried.

Tubbo had been an outlier. Ranboo hadn't had the misfortune of knowing him before his death. Fundy he'd reconnected with on his own time and terms.

But Phil, Niki, and Techno?

He felt faint just looking at them. He wasn't even sure whether they knew he was alive. He didn't even know how they'd gotten into Snowchester — Tubbo wasn't anywhere to be seen,

he hadn't heard the gates open, and the water tunnel directly into the main area had been reconstructed deep underground, its entrance and exit hidden and kept secret between three people.

His eyes wandered towards Ranboo, standing stock-still behind the trio, decked in the same full set of armour and weapons that the others had. Ranboo caught his eyes from far away, shook his head, mouthed: '*Where's Tubbo?*'

And Wilbur understood.

He plastered on his most confident smile, tipped his chin up and narrowed his eyes, strode towards them with his hands in his pockets and with as much nonchalance as he could possibly muster.

"Gentlemen," he greeted, "and lady. What brings you to Snowchester?"

All three of them whipped their heads towards him. He wanted to wince.

Niki's eyes widened, face filling with rage at the sight of him. Ranboo bit his lip, fiddling with the handle of his Netherite sword. Techno raised an eyebrow noncommittally. And Phil-

Phil looked heartbroken.

"Wilbur," his father said, his voice thin, high, laced with disbelief. "You're alive."

Wilbur widened his smile. "So I am. Hello, Phil. Niki, Technoblade." He paused. Ranboo shook his head almost imperceptibly. "And Ranboo, I presume."

"I've heard rumours, but..." Phil continued, "I wasn't sure whether any of them were true. You never... you never reached out to me, any of us."

Ranboo kept looking between Wilbur and the attic of his and Tubbo's house.

"No, I didn't," Wilbur agreed. He straightened his back and clasped his hands together. "I wanted to keep it quiet, a little bit on the down low. We wanted some privacy, surely you can understand, right?"

"I'm your father," Phil said weakly. "I didn't know you were alive," and Wilbur-

He brushed it off. "Of course. Now, what brings you all here to Snowchester?"

Techno stepped closer to him. For all that he dressed to intimidate and seemed to tower over everyone else in his presence, Wilbur was a little amused to remember that he was taller than Techno by a few inches.

He had never been afraid of Technoblade for as long as he lived — he was a god, the Blood God, and gods were all the same, but this one happened to be his father's closest friend, and that meant that he was a close friend of Wilbur's too. Used to be. A long time ago. But he encroached on a place Wilbur called home and he brought his weapons and his army with

him and it had been six months, six months and thirteen years and a lifetime since Wilbur called Technoblade ‘family’.

He smiled at Technoblade just as condescendingly. Appearances, appearances, and just a little bit of heart.

“We heard a little somethin’ down the grapevine,” Techno said. “Somethin’ about Snowchester closin’ down its borders and keepin’ things a complete secret from the rest of the world. We are... a bit of an... an anarchist commune, so to speak, and now that we know you’ve teamed up with Tubbo...”

A blue-tinted memory flashed by Wilbur’s mind — bombs falling from an obsidian grid in the sky, the crater of his country, tridents and lightning and screaming teenagers. Dream strolling along the grid, Techno in the epicentre, Phil soaring high above the wreckage, Niki burning down a tree.

(His legacy, his legacy!

His legacy had been his nation, not the mockery of it that had risen postmortem, his legacy had been songs sung around nighttime campfires and bakeries by the sea and skirmishes fought together in the name of camaraderie — but his legacy had been his pain, the pain he wrought onto his people, had been nights spent crying into his pillow and friends betrayed without a single look back and blood shed in the name of his dreams.

His legacy was dead, and from its ashes rose a phoenix singing a funeral march, him and his Icarus dive and Apollo wrenched away from him.

He flew, he fell, he died, he woke up — to devastation, to death, and wore it around himself in the name of a new, a kinder sort of legacy.)

“Now, who would be stupid enough to start a new government after what happened to the last one?” Wilbur said frostily, his smile curling up a little crueler. He looked at Techno down the length of his nose. “Snowchester has no government, it is not a country. I think, as a resident of this... isolationist colony, I’d be rather confident in saying that, Technoblade.”

“Right,” Techno said, “forgive us for bein’ careful. Is Tubbo keepin’ you here?”

“I chose to stay.”

Unlike some people, he wanted to add, because he was a little bitter. Techno and Phil and Dream, on Doomsday, and his brain spat out more memories of Dream; Dream curling his hands around Tommy’s arm, Dream sending his ghost out to disappear, Dream laughing in Tubbo’s face, Dream, Dream, Dream — the man was mourning, yes, but since when has grief excused anyone’s actions?

Dream has done nothing, *nothing*, to atone. And he might never, and yet, and yet! It wasn’t Wilbur’s right to speak on the topic of redemption and forgiveness, but Techno and Phil and Dream, what were they thinking...?

(Once, Dream had extended a hand and Wilbur had taken it. Once, they were allies, one bent on destruction and the other bent on chaos. Once, they won, and it had been an unconditional victory, and it had been the satisfying end, the ugly end, that they deserved.

But even in his lowest moments he knew, he saw, he pushed back. He saw Dream's fixation on his country and he saw Dream's fixation on his little brother and there had to be a line, there was a line, Wilbur was the line and refused to let Dream cross further than he needed to.)

(Before that, long before that, they had been friends. Wilbur still hadn't taken him out for pizza.)

Techno looked completely unimpressed. Wilbur glanced at Phil, whose face had scrunched up into a grimace, and then he looked at Niki, who still hadn't said a word, who still seethed, and then at Ranboo, who looked up and yelled:

"Tubbo!"

Sure enough, Tubbo was there, smiling and waving as he walked towards them. He came from the direction of his house, Wilbur noted.

"Guys!" Tubbo called out. He flashed them a bright grin as he neared the group.

He looked good, if a little tired, but he seemed ready to do either some fighting or some diplomacy.

"I hope Wilbur hasn't been giving you a bit of a hard time," Tubbo said, joining the group.

Wilbur chuckled and shook his head. "I hope so too, I was just surprised to see some old pals." He very vehemently kept his gaze away from Niki's; he could feel her glaring daggers at him, and he was a coward.

"I didn't know you guys were coming," Tubbo said, "I mean, you didn't give us any sort of heads-up whatsoever."

"That would defeat the purpose of a... surprise visit," Techno said. "Anywho, it doesn't matter now, I think, we're here in peace, we're not lookin' to fight, we're here to survey Snowchester, see what's up. I'm sure it's not too much of a problem."

"If you aren't here to fight, surely you wouldn't mind putting away the weapons and armour, right?" Tubbo asked, and Prime, Wilbur could feel disdain and hostility rolling off Tubbo as he narrowed his eyes at Techno.

A pause. Technoblade narrowed his eyes back, shoulders tense.

"*Surely,*" Tubbo sneered.

"Armour on," Techno said.

"I'll take it," Tubbo replied. "We're not looking to fight, either, of course."

Slowly, the Syndicate's weapons disappeared into their inventories. Wilbur felt a weight lift off his chest, felt like he could breathe again, and Tubbo's smile felt a little less strained.

"Great!" Tubbo clapped his hands. He glanced at Wilbur. "We can tour you around if you'd like. Anything you'd like to know, you can ask away."

"A tour," Techno said. "Sounds great. Let's go."

Wilbur followed the group, Tubbo and Technoblade at the helm, as Tubbo led them around Snowchester, showing them the mansion's construction, the walls and gate, the shorelines, the forest, the main residence area, everything. Everything but a hill, a tower, and a grave.

Tubbo seized control of the conversation, talking his breath away as he tried to keep up appearances to his past executioner and executionee. Wilbur hung around towards the back of the group, sticking relatively close to Ranboo whilst keeping his distance away from Phil and Niki. Ranboo looked absolutely terrified.

When Tubbo showed them the inside of his and Ranboo's house, Wilbur was relieved to find that the ladder leading up to the attic was missing, and the trapdoor had been replaced by a hastily-placed plank of spruce wood. The usual thumping sounds coming from their attic were inconspicuously missing. Michael had to be asleep, or at least hidden away from the main house. Or maybe he just learned to be quiet in the face of danger.

Still, Technoblade lingered at the foyer of Tubbo's house.

"You don't happen to be hiding any government secrets here, do you?" he asked, a joke in monotone.

"Of course not," Tubbo said lightheartedly. "We don't have a government. I've only been hiding nuclear launch codes, nothing to worry about."

"Nuclear launch codes." Techno snorted. "Right."

They lapsed into silence. Tubbo and Technoblade had their gazes fixed onto each other, a challenge thick and evident in the air between them.

Ranboo coughed. "I think I saw a farm, a little over there. And a quarry too, I think. Do you, would you like to, uh, take us there, maybe?"

"Of course!" Tubbo clapped his hands. "The farm, how could I forget, and the quarry too, and oh, would you look at the time — it's getting late, we're gonna have to go and do our routine patrols in a bit!"

"It's midday," Technoblade deadpanned.

"We are a colony of two people, Blade," Tubbo said. "And we have quite a big plot of land to look after. Plus, we are... in peacetime, and we'd like to keep it that way. You must understand, we're quite busy people."

Tubbo bared his teeth in a half-feral smile and gestured towards the door. Wilbur opened it for the three intruders, nodding his head in agreement.

Technoblade looked between the two of them, shrugged, and left the house. Phil and Niki followed suit. Tubbo let out a sigh, shoulders sagging for a moment before he nodded up at Wilbur, mask up and act flawless, and left, too.

(Wilbur didn't stop to question whether Tubbo had been serious about the nukes, not until he looked up at Ranboo and saw the kid's face utterly pale as he stared out at Tubbo and his makeshift confidence.)

And at the end of the tour, they stopped and hung out by the farm. Tubbo and Technoblade were still deep in conversation, all false pleasantries and hands hovering ready to strike by their sides. Wilbur was content sticking by Ranboo, picking at his fingernails and the frayed ends of his scarf, and waiting out the heat gathering on his neck from all the glancing at him that Phil and Niki did when-

"Wil," his father said as he approached him, "can we talk?"

Wilbur looked down at Phil, raised an eyebrow.

"Please," Phil added. He sounded tired. "It's important to me."

"Sure." Something in him melted. "Okay. Sure, let's talk," he said, before he could analyse the feeling in his chest any more than he needed to. He nodded slightly to Ranboo before letting Phil pull him aside.

Once they were out of earshot from everyone else, he turned back to Phil. He was starting to regret ever approaching the Syndicate in the first place; staying inside and holing up indefinitely sounded much, much more appealing than... whatever he was supposed to do.

Still, some things needed to be sorted out.

"What's up?" he asked.

Phil opened his mouth. Closed it. He looked around them, glancing from Techno to Tubbo to Niki to Ranboo and finally looking back to Wilbur. "You're... alive," he said slowly.

"I'm... yes. That, yes, I'm that," Wilbur said. "Where are you going with this?"

"I just—" Phil paused, gesturing lamely at nothing in particular, "you're back." He looked Wilbur up and down, eyes lingering on his chest, as if he was looking for a wound that had closed a lifetime ago. "You look... uh, you look good."

"I'm... thanks, I think." Wilbur shifted his weight from foot to foot. "I've uh, I've been taking care of myself, Phil." He folded his arms, let his posture give way a little to his uncertainties.

Phil sighed and scratched the back of his ear. "Look, Wil, I... know... I said that I- that you didn't contact me, but, but look," he tried, "it's fine. You're not... like, you're not obligated

to do anything, right?"

Wilbur nodded slowly, unsure.

"You're allowed to have your own privacy, and—" Phil gestured uselessly again, "and I'm sorry we didn't let you... come to us... at your own time."

And Wilbur-

Wilbur felt...

Here's the thing.

Wilbur wanted to die. Phil helped him die. But now he was back, and things had changed, and though a little part of him — remnants of his bitter past — felt grateful for his thirteen years in Limbo, every other part of him — screaming to be alive — wasn't. He couldn't help but be wary around four heavily-armed people when he himself stood barehanded with no protection whatsoever. He couldn't help but be afraid of the people he once trusted.

Phil was trying. By Prime was he trying, and Wilbur could see that he was trying. Wilbur was his first and only child, however, and Wilbur only modelled his own parenting after Phil's. Phil wasn't a bad father, just the victim of a bad son- not... not a bad son, maybe, just a son that made too many mistakes.

(Be kinder to yourself.)

But Wilbur wanted to try, too.

Fundy hadn't forgiven him, yet — maybe he had, but he hadn't said the words, and Wilbur wasn't sure whether he wanted to hope too much — and Wilbur knew all too well how it felt like to be hated by your son.

"Fuck," Wilbur said.

He ran a hand through his hair and wiped it down his face. He was a wordsmith, a storyteller, a man who knew how to weave stories out of thin air and twist his narratives around and around his audience — he was great at writing and even better at talking, but now, face-to-face with his father, Wilbur could feel all his verbosity failing him.

"Fuck, Phil, no, look. I fucked up. I'm sorry. I hadn't thought to contact you or visit you and, and you're worried, I know, but even when I thought to let you know..." he trailed off.

Inhale. Exhale.

He was talking to his father. This was Phil. This was someone who wouldn't judge him. This was someone who wanted to accept him. He had nothing to lose — Phil wouldn't let him — and everything to gain.

He just needed to be careful, and be honest.

"I was scared." It was barely an excuse. It wasn't an excuse at all. "I wasn't sure what you'd think of me, still am, but, well. That's- yeah. I'm sorry."

"It's... alright. Okay." Phil nodded hesitantly. "That's, yeah. It's okay. Or, uh, thank you."

"Yeah..."

Phil wasn't meeting his eyes.

"Has Tubbo been good to you?"

"He, uh... he made sure I took care of myself, in the beginning," Wilbur said. "He's not, he's not hurting anyone, he's... not running governments, he's just, he's been... living, just. Just living." He paused, swallowing. "Things have been a little weird, lately, so..."

"And... and you?"

"...I'll be fine," Wilbur managed out. "We're taking care of each other."

He paused.

"I'm sorry for being, uh, being all snappish, earlier," he said. And then, "I'll call you. Sometime. I- I promise."

"You can't, like, come with us?" Phil asked. He backtracked immediately. "I mean, I'm still a little... wary? Of Tubbo. You get me, right?"

"No," Wilbur said. "Yes. I get you, I mean. Yes, I get you, but no, I don't want to leave here, Phil, I'm home — but I don't want to... cut you out of my life... like... yeah."

Phil brightened up visibly at that, and Wilbur couldn't help the kind, genuine smile that curled his lips. His father pat him awkwardly on the shoulder — not quite a hug, Wilbur thought that neither of them were ready for a hug just yet, but the same sentiments were still evident in the gesture.

"I'm glad," Phil said, "I just... I missed you, son."

Wilbur buried his hands deeper into his pockets and nodded slowly, a little hunched into himself. "Yeah. Me too. I've... I've missed you, too... Phil."

His father smiled at him, warm and hesitant — and there was nothing in the world that sounded more appealing to Wilbur than to melt into the embrace of his parent, but they weren't there yet. He wasn't there yet. If Phil tried to hug him now, he wouldn't react all that well.

(Part of this revulsion came from a phantom pain pulsing in his chest. The rest of it came from somewhere that tasted a little like self-loathing.)

"You should talk to Niki," Phil told him, voice low, "I think there's something between the two of you that... you need to... hash out." He shrugged. "But what do I know, kids and their

business and all, right?"

Wilbur laughed nervously. Phil squeezed his shoulder, once, and gave him a little shove in the direction of his- his ex-best friend.

This was fine, this was going well, he talked to his father and didn't end up storming away or having a sword get stuck through him. Phil was the easy part; Phil didn't push back, Phil bent to his challenges and let himself be steamrolled by a desire to reconnect with his son. But not everyone was like Phil — Niki, namely, Wilbur knew that she was never one to accept Wilbur's bullshit for what he wanted it to be.

He stumbled all the way to Niki. He was terrified of her, of what she did to him, but he was ready, he was willing, and he-

"Niki," he started.

She turned to him, an eyebrow raised, heat behind her dagged eyes.

And fucking nevermind- Prime, he wasn't ready.

He wasn't ready at-fucking-all.

He needed and he wanted to say a thousand, a million things all at once, yet at the same time he felt like he'd immediately trail off into silence if he opened his mouth again. He needed to apologise, he needed to excuse himself, he wanted to fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness as much as he wanted to snide her and have her slap him because it was what he deserved- he was a bad person, a bad son, a bad friend- and he-

He was trying. He couldn't be the worst, ever, if he tried.

Because trying implied that he wanted to get better, was indeed getting better, and he might forever be convinced that he was a horrible person but that thought meant nothing when his actions proved otherwise. It was a simple case of disparity between heart and mind, all confusing, all impossible.

He was trying, and part of it meant cutting himself some slack where he needed it the most. He couldn't judge himself too harshly, or at all, when he hadn't fucked up his second chance.

"What," she said curtly.

"I need to talk to you," he said. His confident, straight posture had given up on him; this wasn't a game of diplomacy, he could take diplomacy like a fish could take water — this was nothing more than a case of two estranged friends. He was *shit* at estranged friends.

"What do you have to say?" Niki said. She turned her nose up at him. "Because I have nothing, *nothing* to say to you."

Her hair was pink. She smelled of gunpowder and vanilla extract. When he woke up revived, his old coat had been missing its hood, and a blue-tinted memory of a lady by a burning tree clued him into where it must have gone.

There was a crater in the forests by Snowchester, a crater deep and wide and reminiscent of another haunted by the ghost of constitutions. Tubbo said something about Jack and Niki and Tommy and explosions, when Wilbur asked.

But that wasn't his battle to fight. She was angry at him, and rightfully so.

"I have to apologise to you," he said quietly, as earnestly as he could without letting fear scratch the edges of his words. "No, I- I *want* to apologise to you. I think- I think I've--"

"I don't want to hear it," Niki snapped. "I don't want to hear your apologies, Wil. I know you wouldn't mean it."

Wilbur blinked, furrowed his eyebrows. "But, but I do..."

"No, you *won't*," she cut in harshly, "because I know you're just going to lie again." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Because you lied- *you lied* to all of us! Me! You- you had a dream, and I followed it, but then you just- you ruined it!"

He'd heard those words somewhere, a long time ago, a son to a dictator and a father smiling cruelly at a dying man. He didn't realise what Fundy had meant, not until it was too late, not until everything else had come crashing down on him at the same time and he was left with darkness and heartache in the void.

"You manipulated me, you manipulated all of us- into- into joining your impossible dream!"

Niki shoved back against him, and he stumbled, and his eyes widened and heat gathered unfairly in his tear ducts. She jabbed a finger into his chest.

"And then you left us the moment it was convenient for you!"

And Wilbur had-

(excuses and explanations and justifications and he didn't lie because he believed in his lies too and his dream wasn't impossible but only if it belonged to him and he never manipulated anyone at least not to his knowledge at least not to the best of his intentions and he tried he did but trying wasn't enough was never enough and he was as truthful as he was deceitful and he didn't leave he died he wanted to die he asked it of his father and his father obliged he never wanted to leave he just didn't want to continue existing wished he never existed in the first place because he ruined and he hurt and it was all he was good for and he was wrong, wrong, wrong, he was lying to himself and he had-)

-nothing to refute her words.

"Do you have any idea- I grieved for you, Wil!" she cried. "I didn't- I didn't know what to do, because you betrayed me, but you died, and I didn't eat, didn't sleep, didn't bake, I tried to run away, but- but nothing helped, until..."

He nodded, biting his lips together. Her outburst felt like it had been a long time coming, and as hurt as he felt, he knew that this was just something she needed to let out. He endured. Maybe he deserved it-

(Be kinder to yourself. You deserve responsibility, but you deserve kindness too.)

"Until I found these people," she continued. "And they? They've done more for me than you ever did."

He felt like glass on the verge of shattering, heart in shoddy pieces and windswept in the face of Niki's hurricane.

"Did you ever care? For L'manberg, for the people, for- for me...?" Niki whispered.

(“If you’re going to kill anyone, kill me,” he had said to a dictator, a long time ago, had offered his life up in exchange for Niki’s, because as long as she was safe, as long as she wouldn’t get hurt, he was ready to die.)

"Do you want to hear the easy," Wilbur rasped out, "or the difficult answer to- to that question?"

Niki looked at him in disbelief. "The easy answer," she said, eyes shining, face contorted in rage.

"No," Wilbur said. "I never cared. For anyone, anyone at all."

Something in him twisted, turned, screamed. He'd never know how best to handle these kinds of things.

"Not L'manberg, not my family, no one, and it- all of it, all of you-“ he couldn't stop talking, and there were droplets of tears leaking out his eyes, “were the key and the tools to my power, and you all fell so, so easily under my control, because L'manberg was meant to divide, to fight, to go to war, and I'd do it, all of it, all over again, if it meant that I, and only I, will have- have nothing, but... but destruction, and chaos, and I'm a bad person, the bad guy, and you need to take me down. And I'm back now, and things are going to change, and this? All of this? Snowchester is nothing but a facade and Tubbo is nothing but a pawn and I am nothing but a fraud.”

He felt breathless.

He was crying.

"I'm going to hurt everyone, Niki," he rasped out, "and you were right, irrefutably."

The cold air stung his skin, stung his heart; he was getting rusty at fighting, both in weapons and in words. The knife of his tongue had gotten blunt, rounded into a tool that asked, a tool that helped, a tool that protected instead of jabbed. He hoped Tubbo hadn't heard any of that.

Niki sniffed and wiped her nose, still glaring at him. "The hard answer," she spat. "And don't you *ever* lie to me again."

He swallowed. He really shouldn't have said anything at all — it would've been much, much easier then.

"Yes," he muttered. "Always have. Always will."

"So why did you destroy L'manberg?" Niki asked with her voice choked, wiping at her eyes furiously. "Why did you die?"

"It went bad," Wilbur said. He hesitated, but it needed to be said. "I went bad."

(The smell of bread. L'Manberg. The Revolution. Bullying Tommy. Sparring with Techno. The wind. Being president. People cheering for me. Fundy growing up. The van. Tubbo building everything. Phil protecting me. Sally the Salmon. Philza stabbing me with a sword. A large explosion. The taste of salt. Air in my lungs. Winning the election. A ravine. Techno's armoury.

Books. Tunnels. Arrows.

Niki.)

"I want to apologise." Wilbur lowered his head. "If you'll let me. I don't want to fight you, I don't want to fight at all, not anymore."

"You are not forgiven, Wilbur Soot," Niki told him, eyes flashing with dozens upon dozens of emotions he couldn't put names to, "and I don't want to hear your apologies. I don't want them now."

He nodded, closing his eyes. "Okay," he said. "That's okay--"

"But," Niki interrupted, "but. That's not okay- it's..."

She exhaled in frustration.

"It's not okay, because even after everything, I *do* want to forgive you," she said. "Eventually. I want you to come to me next week, and if I've changed my mind, I'll forgive you."

"...And if you haven't?"

"Then come back to me the week after that," she replied. Her eyes flashed with conviction. "And the week after that, and the week after, and so on, and so forth, until..."

"Until you've forgiven me," he finished. His heart leapt into his throat.

Niki nodded, still glaring as heatedly at him. "I want to see you," she said. "You were my best friend, *were*, and I want to believe that, that after all this time, after you died and came back, you've changed. For the better."

"I like to think that I have," he said quietly. "I think you've changed, too. I think, I think you look... happier."

"I am," Niki affirmed. "This is the happiest I've been in a long time since..." she trailed off. "I've been baking, again--" and Wilbur *understood*, "and I'm not going to let anyone, especially you, take that away from me."

But she was kind. And maybe she cared for him, too, maybe that was the reason she'd been so angry at him.

She asked, "And you?"

"...Me?" he asked slowly. "...Am I happy?"

He paused. He looked around, looked at Ranboo, looked at Tubbo, looked at the attic of their house and the shores of Snowchester. He looked at Phil, at Niki, thought about Fundy, all the promises he'd made, the idea that he'd banked so many of his most precious relationships on trust he hadn't known he was still capable of giving.

"I will be," he decided. Yet another promise, yet another path into the unknown. "I'm trying my best, I think."

"Good," she said curtly, giving him a sharp nod. "That's something I want to hear coming from you."

He nodded back wordlessly.

"Next week, Wilbur Soot," she said. "You know where to find me."

And then she turned away, her back towards him as she made her way to Phil and Ranboo.

Wilbur watched her go. His head spun.

He found himself stumbling into his next adversary as Tubbo finished his conversation with Technoblade and rotated over to Phil.

Neither Wilbur nor Techno approached the other, but somehow they still found their way to each other.

He didn't have much to say to Techno, or anything at all, really; they'd been close, a long time ago, and then they weren't close anymore, simple as that. They'd crossed paths again when Techno agreed to join Pogtopia, but by that time Wilbur had started keeping all his allies at arm's length; Techno had been little more than Wilbur's favourite wildcard, towards the end.

Wilbur knew what happened in Doomsday, knew the array of betrayals all branching out of Technoblade's Achilles' heel. But at the end, he also knew that Tommy had been fond of Techno, so there had to be more than what meets the eye.

"Wilbur," Techno started, nodding at him. "Nice scarf."

Wilbur nodded back. "Thank you," he said. "I hope you and Tubbo weren't talking about a potential Doomsday reenactment on Snowchester."

"Close, close, but not quite," Techno said, shrugging, "we were talkin' about nuclear warfare."

“...I hope that that’s a joke.”

“Of course it is.” Techno chuckled, lips twitching. Wilbur couldn’t find the joke as funny. “Calm down, Wilbur, as long as you guys aren’t goin’ around and makin’ governments, we’re cool.”

“I don’t think that... that’s going to be a... a problem, anytime soon, or ever, for us specifically,” Wilbur said. He felt horribly weak in the knees. “The last governments either of us made ended horribly.”

He had been sincere, straight-faced, but Techno still found it funny.

“You know,” Techno said after a short, subdued laughing fit, “I haven’t seen much of Tommy around, lately. At all, really, any clue where he might’ve gone?”

Wilbur swallowed. “No,” he said. Tommy’s death was, had to be, as much of a secret as it could be. Tommy had a lot of enemies — and by extension, *they* had a lot of enemies — who knew what would happen if the news of his death became widespread? “I haven’t seen him anywhere, actually,” Wilbur continued. “Haven’t seen him since, uh, since... November. Since my death, that is.”

“Huh. That’s weird.” Techno hummed lowly and crossed his arms together. “Last I saw him, we were screamin’ at each other over the crater of your country. And afterwards, things would disappear from my chests in my house, but. Huh. Well. They stopped.”

“Really,” Wilbur said dryly.

“I kind of miss having to restock my golden apples and potions every few days,” Techno said. He was tapping a hooved finger against his arm. “Tommy’s still got my Axe of Peace, you know that? I think I want him to return it, one day.”

(Technoblade never dies, never cries, never loses; Technoblade never mourned his losses and betrayals only added a number to the growing list of enemies he’d gathered; Technoblade owned the strongest armour and weapons on the server and none of it was strong enough to hide the beating heart he wore on his sleeve.)

Technoblade spoke in jokes and jabs and riddles. Wilbur Soot was a wordsmith.

They were close, once. And then they weren’t. Simple as that.)

“Is that all that matters to you?” Wilbur asked, not unkindly. “After everything, Technoblade? Is that all you really care about?” But without patience, without any sugar left to coat his words. “Your Axe...?”

Technoblade was silent for a moment. A moment too long, in which Wilbur felt something seize up in his stomach and straighten his spine and harden a scowl on his face, because for a moment there he was ready to think differently of Technoblade, but of course, of course, he was overzealous, too hopeful, too ready to welcome someone else back into his life and rekindle something that had died a long time ago-

(Be kind. Be kind.)

“You’re not getting it, Wilbur,” Techno said, levelling his gaze. “It’s not the Axe that I want. I want *Tommy* to return it.”

Wilbur breathed deeply. He had to keep reminding himself — he was the type who was quick to jump to conclusions of both extremes.

“I saw a grave, back there,” Techno muttered. “He’s not dead, is he?”

“No,” Wilbur replied, and looked away. “Of course he isn’t-“ but his voice cracking said otherwise, “you don’t know shit about what happened, Technoblade.”

“I don’t.” A pause. “I wish I did. I wish I could’ve done something about it.”

“Do you regret it?” Wilbur asked. “Doomsday.”

“No,” Techno replied. “November sixteenth, do you?”

And here was the problem: L’manberg needed to go.

L’manberg was corrupt, was turning unrecognisable, was becoming something that people could use as leverage against one another, was starting to grow roots in violence and forgetting its legacy of peace. L’manberg was no longer his, his dream, and it died as he did — ugly, painful, in disgrace.

“Yes,” he said.

Here was the truth: he still missed it.

L’manberg was the home of many people. It was the bakery, the van, the docks, the podium, the white house, the walls, the space program, the Elton John house, the river that ran behind Jack Manifold’s house. It was life, unbridled, and for a while it had been everything he wanted, his dreams realised far above his crumbling shoulders.

It couldn’t live without inevitably resorting to violence, was what he learnt in the Revolution. He had the idea of destroying it far too early in its lifetime.

“I hurt people when I destroyed L’manberg,” he said softly. “I betrayed the trust of everyone around me, Techno. I would destroy the nation a second time, a third time, if I need to, but I’m not going to betray my friends ever again.” He was taller than Technoblade, and he used every inch he had on him as he straightened up and glared down on Techno. “If you expect me to do otherwise, hell, if you *try* anything against us... I’ve died before and I came back. There’s nothing in the world that can stop me from-“

“Wilbur,” Techno interrupted, “we are in peacetime.” He shook his head slightly. “There’s no need to threaten me, I’m not interested in harmin’ people that have learned their lesson.”

“Our lesson,” Wilbur said, tasting the word as if it were a bitter pill in his mouth. “Out of fear, Technoblade? You destroyed L’manberg so that no other nation would ever be built, out

of fear?"

"It worked, didn't it?" Techno said, his voice chilly.

"I will never understand you," Wilbur said.

"Of course you won't. I'm me, no one understands Technoblade like I do." Techno flashed a smirk, but it disappeared as quickly as it came. "But we're digressing from the point, I feel like."

"The point," Wilbur repeated. "What was the point?"

Techno paused, meeting Wilbur's eyes head-on. "The point," he started, "was that Tommy hasn't been around for months. And no one's seen him since you returned."

"Yeah," Wilbur said. "We haven't seen him around, either. We don't know where he's gone, Techno, no one does."

(Wheat fields and white skies and home and peace all year round and I'll see you when I see you.

Empty houses and flowers dotting the fields and a heart beating alongside his, almost imperceptibly soft, memories that would never fade from his mind ever again and I'll be with you forever.

Wilbur didn't know where Tommy had gone. No one did. He hoped that his little brother was happy, wherever he was.)

"Something tells me you know a little more than that," Techno pressed.

He knew. He had to have known.

"But that's whatever. Here." He handed Wilbur an item — a bundle of flowers, yellow roses, thorns and leaves and a deep sentiment Techno couldn't put directly into words. "If you see him anywhere, give him these, will you?"

"They'll die before he'll see them," Wilbur said, clutching the bundle of flowers and refusing to wince as thorns pressed into his skin.

"I trust you not to let them," Techno said easily. "Consider it a favour. I'll repay it however you need me to."

Wilbur nodded. "You should leave," he said, without any heat whatsoever to his words. "If I see you again, I think it'll be far too soon."

Techno brushed off his comment with a half-shrug as he turned away. "Good to see you, Wilbur."

"You too, Techno," Wilbur said, and was surprised to find that he meant it.

(Wilbur planted Techno's yellow roses by the door to Tommy's house the next time he visited the area.)

He would never understand Technoblade like he used to, never again, but the flowers had to mean something, had to say so much more about Techno. He hadn't regretted destroying L'manberg, but maybe he was like Wilbur. Maybe Tommy meant a little more to him, too.)

Later, he watched the Syndicate head off as Tubbo gripped his hand so tightly that he couldn't feel his fingers. Ranboo sent them one last lingering look before the group disappeared outside the wall of Snowchester.

Wilbur had way too many fucking promises to keep.

And yet — he put his faith in every one of them.

("Hey, Wilbur, sorry I wasn't there to greet them, I was, uh. I was priming the nukes, pointing them at their base... just in case, you know? Preemptive measurements, you get it.")

"...So, Tubbo, was no one going to tell me that the nukes weren't a joke?"

Wilbur never wanted to come back.

After dying for the third time and having a part of him break off to become a ghost, he hadn't cared about living anymore. But now, he'd put to rest everything that ever made him angry, and he was glad to say, at last, that he was alive, and had no plans on rectifying that anytime soon, or ever.

He couldn't say that living was all that terrible; sure, he'd lost far too many parts of himself that he'll never get back; sure, he never stopped wishing that things would go back to the way they were, when they were easier and he was unconditionally happy; sure, the dark still beckoned to him and he lingered on lit fires a little longer than he probably should — but all these thoughts were ones that skittered off as soon as he woke up and opened his blinds.

Every day without fail, Ranboo showed up at his door to greet him for the morning and sometimes came bearing a small gift — cookies, bread, cake.

Every day without fail, Tubbo asked about his checklist and made sure his food stock never ran out and talked to him like they were old friends — scary stories and cooking recipes and war songs they used to sing around a campfire.

Every day without fail, Wilbur woke up, looked out his window, out to the sea, and breathed in cold air that burned his lungs a little, just enough to make his nose run.

He watched the sun rise daily, allowed himself a few minutes of silence at the break of dawn where he'd look at the colours of the sky for what they were, and be grateful, be happy, let

himself listen to the universe hum down at him, hear the words for what they could be and smile back with all he had.

(*And the universe looked down on him to say-*)

He taught Tubbo and Ranboo Piglin until they could begin teaching Michael how to speak Common. He was there when Michael crafted his first sword, he was there chaperoning Michael on his first trip to Snowchester's forest, he was there when Ranboo heard his son say 'Dad' in Common for the first time, and he was there when Michael trotted up to Tubbo and told him:

(*I love you.*)

He took care of the flowers in Tommy's house, the yard of which had turned into something of a garden — well-kept grass and assorted flowers and a worn bench and a broken jukebox that Wilbur couldn't bring himself to replace. He brought flowers back for Ranboo sometimes, made sure to include alliums in his bundles because Ranboo loved alliums, because alliums were important to Tommy, too, and Ranboo let slip one day that Tommy only warmed up to him when they started exchanging flowers as gifts.

He remembered New L'manberg, Tubbo's L'manberg, and he remembered the way Tubbo never seemed to grieve the destruction of what was his. He knew Tubbo needed something, though, so he built a dome in Snowchester and lured a few bees in and started a bee farm, added that to his list of errands and gave it up for Tubbo when he had too many things to do in one day. Tubbo brightened when he tended to the bees — a piece of his innocence reclaimed — and it was worth the work to build the farm and so, so much more, Wilbur decided. After only a day, Wilbur came back to find it fully automated. Tubbo was an enigma.

He visited Sam by the Prison and he visited Niki in her underground city and he visited Phil in the Arctic and he 'came across' Fundy by the ruins of his country far too many times for it to be a coincidence. He'd been weak, once, when he was alone. And now he had people again. It was a matter of keeping what he had, and he was getting stronger by the day, strong enough to stand his ground with his arms splayed out beside him and protect everything he'd been allowed to take back.

And Tommy?

Tommy was nowhere, and everywhere at once.

(*"Thanks for everything," Wilbur wanted to say, but Tommy already knew.*)

Tommy laid six feet underneath a grave in Snowchester, a grave by a tower on a hill adorned with memories and living legacies.

Tommy was gone; to the rest of the server he'd left for another server, someday to return, to the few in the know, he *had left for another server, thank you, someday to return*. To Wilbur, Death had come and treated his brother kindly — she had given him beauty where he

deserved it, and he would have his freedom in Elysium, in Valhalla, in Eden, under endless skies and safety.

Tommy was everywhere. His memory haunted the Prime Path, L'manberg's crater, the Community House, the Prison, Snowchester, everywhere. He lived on in the bedtime stories that Ranboo told Michael, he lived on in the walls that Tubbo fortified everyday, he lived on in every breath that Wilbur inhaled, in every step that he dared to take, in every word he spoke and every day he woke up ready to live.

Tommy was dead.

Sometimes Wilbur cried just hearing his name. Sometimes Wilbur could go on for hours reminiscing about his shenanigans and laugh at the memory of his spitfire jokes. Sometimes he felt a whole lot of nothing, emptiness in the space beneath his heart where there's smoke in place of an old broken hearth.

Thus was the nature of grief, he thought, he learnt. Things would never be the same again without Tommy, and this was a reality that he needed to live in, whether he liked it or not, whether he thought he could.

("You are strong, you are strong, you are strong enough, stronger than you know. For you are the child of void and the child of darkness — love, quiet and soft, guardian of the innocent and the vulnerable, the deep space between the stars. And you are the child of fire and the child of light — love, burning and bright, precious metals and infinity screaming forever upwards.")

Still.

He lived.

(So said the universe, kind as it was, cold as it could be, a distant presence by his periphery and stars blinking awake at night as he slept.

Death swept the lands around him, promising him Paradise at the end of his road, and though he had a brother on the other side, he still had a family on this one, and damn him if he ever tried to betray them for any reason henceforth.

His mother looked down on him and smiled.

She opened her mouth to speak-

'You are love, and you are loved, forever, forever, forever-'

-and he couldn't hear her, would never hear her again. But she promised to take care of his brother. That alone was enough.)

And one day, he would pick up a guitar and learn to sing.

And one day, he would pick up a pen and learn to write.

And one day, he would pick up a crossbow and he would answer to the call of duty, when word of Tommy's death would bleed out and his enemies would rear their heads at the opportunity to strike.

He would wake up to a blaring alarm, Ranboo banging on his door to tell him about a fight against, say, the Eggpire, and he would reach for his communicator to call in a favour. Tubbo would hand him armour and he would wear it without complaint, tucking his scarf underneath his chestplate to keep it from coming undone.

He would be there, gathered in the castle of a traitor king, and he'd smile genially at Eret when they greeted him. Everyone would be there — allies, acquaintances, the enemies of their enemies — and some people would gape at Wilbur Soot, the dead back alive, but the ones that mattered wouldn't.

He wouldn't lead them, of course, he could lead a nation but he couldn't lead an army, and he'd barely led L'manberg at all, back then. He would sit back, watch as the server bickered and bantered and threw jabs at one another and ignored one missing person among them, and he would smile to himself, thinking back to a time long gone.

The server was family, after all, and he was a part of it whether he liked it or not.

When they would start to leave, Wilbur would hang towards the back of the group, a fond smile still on his face. He would reminisce, and someone would notice, perhaps Tubbo, and he would ask, "Are you coming, Wilbur?"

And when all of this would happen, he'd answer, "Of course," and follow his family out to fight.

But until then, Wilbur was content.

Chapter End Notes

they're going to be alright i think :,) thank u folks for reading my funny little story!

special thanks to my betas jamie georgesspotify and cesca cespool, to hoke havok wreakinghavok as per usual, and to the Oneshot OST for carrying me through the writing process!!

here's [a short playlist](#) i've made if you'd like to wind down and listen to the songs that i listened to basically on loop while writing !!

here are some pieces of fanart ive gotten (AAAAAAA) for the fic, these are all so gorgeous and please do show the artists some love please ill cry /pos:

[by @_georgesspotify on twitter \(1\)](#)

[by @_georgesspotify on twitter \(2\)](#)

[by @_ces_pool on twitter \(1\)](#)

[by @_ces_pool on twitter \(2\)](#)

[by @_venbell_on twitter \(1\)](#)

[by @_venbell_on twitter \(2\)](#)

[by @_auramoonlit_on twitter](#)

[by @_Kyuchuq_on twitter](#)

[by @_axellotl_on twitter](#)

[by @_TinyCoffeeShop on twitter](#)

shh no one tell them but every time i see one of these i cry a little and then pog through the tears /pos

as per usual, leave a kudos and comment if you enjoyed the story !! i'd honestly love to see what you think, reading u guys' thoughts give me motivation to write and improve going forward !!

once again, thank u for reading, and stay safe!

End Notes

you can find me [here on twitter](#)!! i post art and argue with children (/j) on the timeline occasionally :)

anyway have a good day and thank u for reading !! <3

Works inspired by this one

[repair boy](#) by [FizzyOrange](#)

[So Now I'm Lost in This Intrinsic Pain \(So I May Learn to Exist Again\)](#) by [chaosiislovely](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!